

The PROGRESS *of* VICE.

BEING THE
SUBSTANCE
Henry OF SOME *Sabbath*
SERMONS

his PREACHED in *Book*
CARTER-LANE.

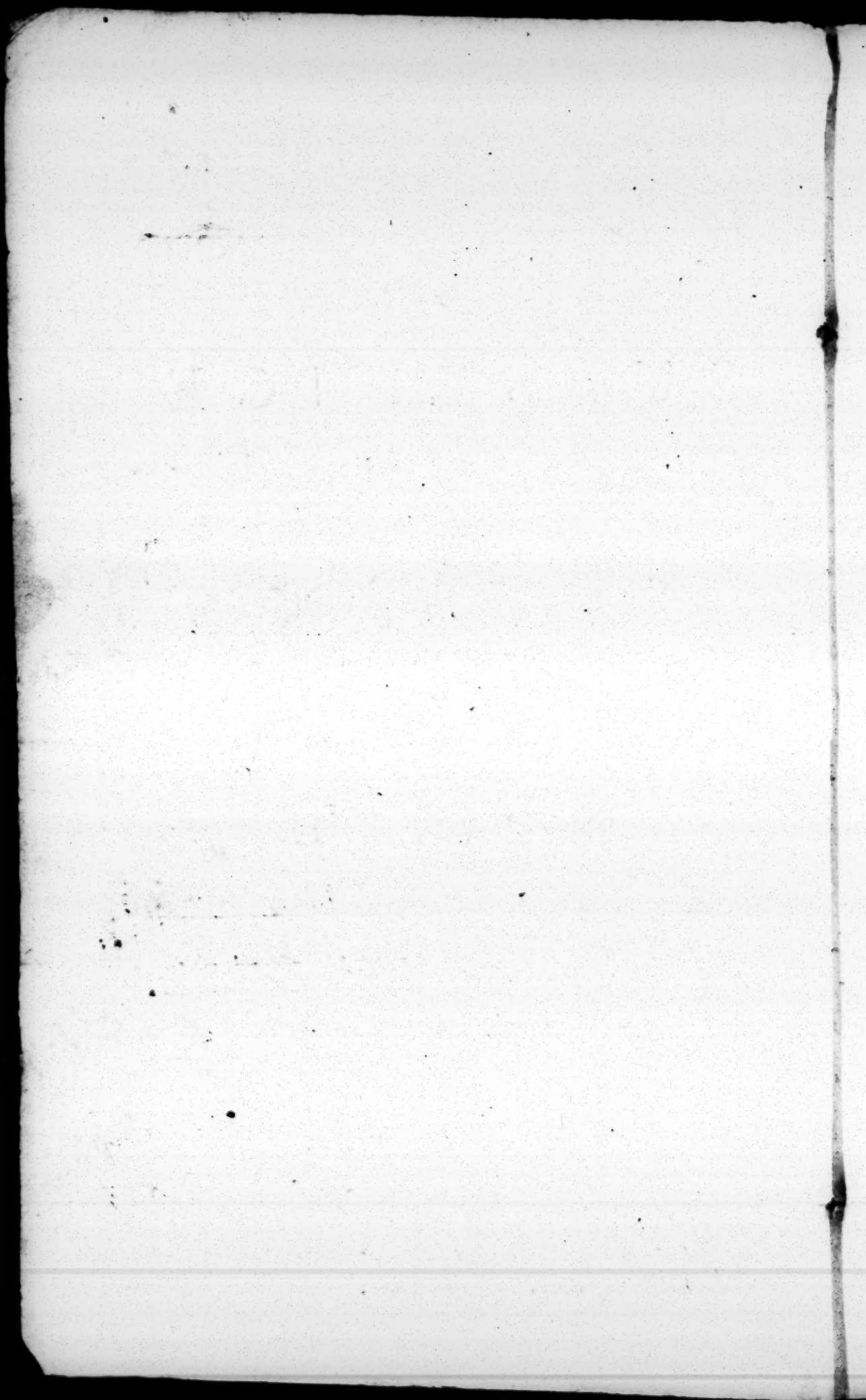
On PSALM i. i:

By THOMAS NEWMAN.

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THE P R E F A C E.

WHEN there is such a number of treatises, already extant, very strongly pleading the cause of religion and virtue, some may think that the world should not be troubled with more, without some special reason, or some particular apology. But I declare I have no reason for the publication of this, but the hope of benefiting my fellow-creatures, which I think needs no apology.

I have long, with great uneasiness and concern, beheld the waste and desolation that many

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younger minds of both sexes have sustained ; which, when I have by conversation and enquiry traced to their cause, I have generally found hath been owing principally, if not entirely, to corrupting principles and wicked Company. I have in the following pages therefore done my best, as briefly and plainly as I could, to expose the groundlessness and absurdity of the one, and to set the danger of the other to view : hoping, through the grace of God, in some degree to assist towards the disabusing those minds that have been merely deluded by the plausibility of the principles, and the awakening the thoughtless who are
in

in no apprehension of hazard from the company of the wicked.

The principles I have endeavoured to explode were not chosen out of others for their weakness, but their strength: I could recollect none that were more plausible, and I really laboured to give them all their strength, as far as expression would contribute. Whether they are confuted, the Reader must judge: I profess to design their confutation. If I have not under any of the heads suggested any new thoughts or arguments, to those of greater reading or of more extensive reach than myself, yet it will be a great satisfaction

faction if I have set old ones in a more convincing light to any mind; or if, by the connection of things, what is here said carries any stronger conviction to any person than what they have met with before.

I write with a particular view to the benefit of those who are entering, or have but few years since entered, upon the world. I am very apprehensive of their great danger of being corrupted and led away to their present and final ruin, by those two sources of Vice which are here enlarged on, and which, as steps, most speedily and fatally prepare for the finished character of the scorner. It is

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is not from any personal discontent or disappointment, nor with any reflection upon divine providence if I should say "that former days were better than these:" as to the fact in general I believe it might be justly asserted; more especially in respect of the Education of young persons, the sobriety of the friends of liberty, and the religion of the religious. But, I will venture to affirm "that these days are not better than former ones:" and if so, the wisest and best will smile upon every sincere and regular attempt, as I hope this will be accounted, towards the preservation or rescue of the rising generation from the deceptions

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*deceptions and snares of vice ;
since men of the most distinguished
wisdom and goodness in former
days have thought no time or pains
better bestowed, nor a love to re-
ligion and mankind better eviden-
ced, than in that way.*

*However defective this attempt
may be towards its professed end
in the judgment of any, I desire
they would take no other revenge
upon it, for the sake of the inten-
tion, than to employ their better
parts and pens in the same work,
and with the same view : and here-
in, the author gives it under his
hand, he will not only forgive,
but thank them, though this should
thereby be set aside. As for those
into*

into whose hands this may fall, I desire whenever they sit down to read, they would read a chapter at once, in order to their having a fuller view of the subject, and the forming a better judgment of the propriety of each part. And when they have read it once, if it will bear, I would desire them to give it a second reading; that they may have the answers and the arguments ready for use in an hour of danger and temptation.

The reasonings are the strongest, and the advices the best I was master of: what the fruit of all may be, I know not. But if any one shall derive from hence a greater dread of the beginnings of vice,
stronger

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stronger and more effectual resolutions against the snares and temptations to it, and are more determined for holiness and heaven ---- God shall have the glory : whose influence and blessing I most unfeignedly implore and depend upon for success, in this and all other like attempts of usefulness to mankind. In the prospect of that blessing towards the rendering this useful to some, I am fully prepared for any thing I may meet with from any quarter, though it be ungrateful in itself; and but for the hopes of that blessing to that end, I would never preach or write more.

PSALM

Henry Davies

PSALM i. I.

Book

*Blessed is the man that walketh not
in the council of the ungodly,
nor standeth in the way of sin-
ners, nor sitteth in the seat of
the scornful.*

IF it be any thing of an objection against religion, “ that it is a *considerable time* “ before the difficulties of it are con- “ quered, and before any *pleasure* is found “ in it, and that these can never be experi- “ enced without great labour and struggle;” doubtless it is equally an objection against vice, “ that persons cannot *presently* be in- “ sensible of the *pains* and *miseries* that accom- “ pany it, nor *presently* subdue that shame “ and fear which the God of nature hath “ implanted as guards against it, and as the “ punishment of it under a conviction of “ guilt.” Insensibility and hardness is a
work

work of time ; and, where there hath been the advantage of a good education, the attainment thereof requires *more painful* labour than the attainment of that habitual goodness from whence the pleasures and satisfactions of religion are found. Sin gains its *first* admission more easily, and sometimes very suddenly ; but no one arrives at any great heights of wickedness, but by degrees. Some steps are in order of nature before others ; but every one paves the way for the next : one thing leads on to another, and one sin very often creates a necessity for more to disguise or to defend it, till the creature dare not look back, but plunges as deep as he can to drown reason and conscience ; by which his character is *finished* for wickedness, his state for misery.

Scripture very often prescribes our *duty* under the recommendation of it to us as *our happiness* : the reason of which is evidently this, “ To assure us of the inseparable connection between them, and to lead us always to look upon the articles of duty as the means of our felicity.” The text runs in this manner ; describing the religious person under the character of the
 blessed

blessed or *happy* one. It is well known, the two general articles of duty are, “ The ceasing from or avoiding evil, and the practising of what is good :” The text immediately respects the former, pointing out a means peculiarly serviceable thereto ; which is, the renouncing all converse, society, and friendship with the wicked as such, or as far as in our circumstances it can be avoided. This in the general is all that some learned persons will allow to be the psalmist’s design. Others think, and in my account not unjustly, that he intended a particular *gradation* in these words ; that he rises from one degree of wickedness to another, and thereby describes different *ranks* of sinners, or different *stages* of vice. I infer not this from the bare terms of ungodly, sinners, and scornful, because I know the two first at least are used promiscuously ; but from the three expressions *taken entire*. They *first* walk in the counsel of ungodly, *then* stand in the way of sinners, and *at last* come to sit in the seat of the scornful. And as these are thus set after one another, they have a great deal of natural influence one upon another.

I persuade myself, could many, who have run great lengths of impiety and vice, have foreseen or been brought to believe the tendency and influence of their *first steps* towards the *last stage*, or what the beginnings would have led them to, they would have shuddered, and have expressed their own horror and detestation in as strong a manner as those who were concerned for them: Whilst those very persons proceeding *gradually* from one step to another, have without much reluctance been drilled on to *consummate* vice, and have sat down there with great security. As describing therefore a *progress* of vice from one degree or station of it to another, I shall consider these words.

C H A P. I.

S E C T. I.

THE first step or stage here mentioned, as leading to a riveted consummate state of impiety, is *the walking in the counsel of the ungodly*.

By this I apprehend is meant, consulting and advising with them, or which is the same

same thing, imbibing their *maxims* and *principles*, and acting upon them. By principles, I mean *leading opinions*, which are eminently at the foundation of practice. Thus it is said of *Abaziah*, that *he walked after the counsel* of the house of *Abab* *. He took his maxims and measures from them. In like manner when *Job* had mentioned some of the principles of the prophane, such as the denying any obligations to a regard of God, or any advantages accruing from any regards paid to him; to convince his friends that he was not of their tribe, he adds, *The counsel of the wicked is far from me* ||: That is, “ I detest
 “ such principles and maxims as these,
 “ and will never take my measures from
 “ them, or be influenced by them.” The greatest part of Mankind indeed, run into the madnesses of iniquity from habitual carelessness and inattention as to good and evil: they have none to call them to reflection, and their tyrannous inclinations hurry them on to one thing after another, as it presents itself. But generally speaking, when those who have had any thing deserving the name

§ 2 Chron. xxii. 5.

|| Job xxi. 16.

of *Education*, throw off the impressions and influence thereof; their understandings are *first* abused by false propositions and reasonings : their errors in practice, when they are any thing prevalent, are grounded on some errors as to *principles*. I say not that they are always *deceived* into them : they may probably some times see the falsity of them, but a sinful inclination disposes them *to wish* they were true ; and when that is made judge, or hath leave to represent things to the understanding, a lie is sooner embraced and believed too than we are aware of.

Under this head, may it not be very proper and useful to consider some of those principles, which in their nature and design promote wickedness, and destroy piety and virtue ? by which many in the interest of vice are defending and supporting their practice, and have with too much success proselyted others. They are various ; I shall mention those which are most plausible, most common, and which, as far as I have been able to judge, have done most mischief ; under each endeavouring to shew their fallacy and want of foundation. To begin.

S E C T. II.

SOME of the more ingenuously wicked, that they might at once excuse and pursue their sinful inclinations, have suggested this, whereby many have been corrupted. “ That there is a chain of causes and effects flowing from the nature of man and the nature of things, deriving a *necessity* upon human actions : in such and such circumstances, persons cannot *but* do as they do : such causes concurring, such effects must *unavoidably* follow : in particular appearances of things, persons are *necessarily* led on to particular behaviour ; they *must* act so and so, and *can’t do otherwise* : hereupon, there is no action they are chargeable with, how bad soever, that they could help doing when they did it, any more than the fire, if I may so express it, can help burning.” By this principle of fate and necessity many have endeavoured to make themselves easy in their vices, and to reconcile others to the same practice. And it must be owned, if there is really such

a *fatality* and *necessity* as to human actions, it wipes off all the crime and guilt from the worst. And there is the strongest presumption that whenever this principle is embraced, it is for the sake of following vice without restraint or reproach from conscience, or fear of punishment from God.

But to shew the fallacy of this to every capacity, I need only ask, with what justice do we blame or prosecute a felon or a murderer, let the injury or cruelty they are chargeable with be ever so great; if they *could do no otherwise* at that time and under those circumstances? Every prosecution of such a one would be downright barbarity and cruelty in us, if there be any such things; and every execution of those we now style the worst of criminals, would then be what we now style, murder: for it would be taking away the life of an *innocent* person; because he could not *but* do what he did: nay, whatever injury he did to others could not be criminal, if *necessitated* by his very frame, or which is the same thing, by his maker, to do as he did. The ruffian, however barbarous, could not be blame-worthy in any degree. For if *necessity* was the *cause* of his
acts,

acts, it is a sufficient *plea* and *excuse* for them with all their circumstances : and they who assert the former must admit the latter. If the abettors of this principle claim the benefit of *necessity* to justify their *own* acts, *others* surely have as good a claim thereto in justification of all the violence and injury that they commit against *them*; and *they* ought to be believed and acquitted too when they say, “ they could not help it.”

But let me appeal to every one; and we need go no further than ourselves for a confutation of this. Are we told that human actions are attended with a *fatality*, that mankind must *necessarily* act as they do, and cannot do otherwise?——Let us but reflect upon the workings of *our own minds* under the sense of what we style a vicious act. Is it not many times engaged in with great *reluctancy* and *opposition* from the mind? Do not our consciences check in the commission, smite and reproach us when we have done it? Are we not fill'd with shame and uneasiness upon a reflection? Whence doth this arise? It is evidently from our own sense of the *voluntariness* of our actions; or of *the power we had of not doing* what we did? It can proceed
from

from nothing else : it can belong to nothing but actions, properly *our own*, perfectly *voluntary*, in opposition to necessity, which might have been avoided, and for the evil of which *we know we are answerable*.

If we would but attend to our minds, we should find that our uneasiness under a consciousness of a *wicked* act is altogether of *another kind*, from what attends any event *we could not help*. Supposing any event brought upon us purely by providence, this may excite *grief* ; but it never did, it never will produce *shame* and *self-reproach* : and the reason is, because we could not prevent or avoid it. When we do find self-accusation and reproaches under some actions, which is more or less universal, doth not every one see a *direct imputation* of those actions to ourselves, and a *charging* ourselves with them as *free* and *voluntary*, and which might have been forborn ? Can any creature that is reasonable believe those actions to be fatal, for which they blame themselves as much as they could do were they ever so free, or ever so much the matter of choice ? Our own consciences then, if but attended to, sufficiently confute this principle of a fatality

or necessity accompanying our actions: our own sense and feeling is altogether on the side of liberty: if our sensations do not impose upon us, we are *sure we are free*. I believe the most subtil of the vicious tribe would find it very difficult to *invent* any evidence of the *freedom* of human actions which doth not accompany them at present. Since then our own experience is sufficient to expose this principle, I hope we shall not be corrupted by it; for that would be to be argued out of our experience, against which no argument is allowed valid. And if the sense of our own minds may not be depended upon to ascertain our liberty or power of self-determination, we may be deceived as to our understandings themselves, since we have nothing but *that* inward consciousness to assure us we do understand, or have any perception of truths: and then all disputes about this and every thing else is quite idle. Let us but consult our own minds then, and see how it is with them under such actions, and if we are honest we may soon detect the delusion and fallacy. This wretched opinion may in time probably help us off with
much

much of the shame and fear that our vices occasion ; but in the mean time, that very shame and fear which we *feel* from a vitious act, is a standing evidence of the falshood of the principle.

S E C T. III.

ANOTHER counsel or principle of the ungodly is this, “ That it is not sup-
 “ posable so great and happy a Being as
 “ God is should take notice of any thing
 “ that we do. What is it to him what we
 “ are, or how we behave? It is not likely
 “ so perfect a Being should concern himself
 “ with any thing without himself, much less
 “ interest himself in human affairs, or with
 “ what is done by the children of men.”

This principle, tho’ it in words acknow-
 ledges a Divine Being, *in deed* and *in effect*
 denies it. It lays the ax to the root of all
 religion ; it takes off all restraints, all fear of
 punishment, and all hope of reward ; it ren-
 ders all the expressions of religion and all ap-
 prehensions of future retribution, idle and
 ridiculous. For these two things are insepa-
 rably connected, “ If God hath no con-
 “ cern with us, we have none with him.”

That

That we may not be led to walk by this principle, let us consider, what is it that should render it unlikely or impossible for God to concern himself with our affairs, or that should render it absolutely indifferent to him how we behave? This must flow from something in his nature or ours. — What is there *in his* nature to render his regarding our behaviour as a governor so very absurd a thing? Is it because it would break in upon his happiness, and interrupt his own self-enjoyment? This is grounded on a most ridiculous notion of the divine felicity; as if it lay in indolence and inactivity: and on as ridiculous an imagination of the manner of God's exercising his perfections: as if his regarding the actions of mankind must be a toilsome care, and the cause of weariness. This is to measure the power of the Creator by the weakness of creatures, and to conclude that of him, who is absolutely perfect, which we find in ourselves because of our imperfections. Did he *make* the World? If we think in that absurd manner of him, that this principle would lead us to do, must not such a complicated system of things, so various as to parts, so exact and various as to design,

design, lead us to imagine it cost him great *labour* and *anxiety*, and was a great *interruption to his repose*? But is not this a very stupid whim? And is it not as silly to suppose he cannot regard our behaviour without interrupting his own happiness, or to impute so mean an imperfection as toil or trouble to God?

Nor is that notion of the divine greatness more just or wise, from whence men would argue it to be *unworthy* or *unbecoming* God to concern himself with us, or to regard our conduct and behaviour. For, the greatness that under this pretence is ascribed to God, is no better than a weak pride, a mean haughtiness, a supercilious disdain; which is one of the silliest and most contemptible dispositions that can belong to a poor elevated mortal; which we most justly scorn and despise amongst ourselves. It's true, we are mean, we are nothing, when compared with himself; but are we not in the rank of beings wherein he placed us? It was not beneath his excellency to *produce* such beings as we are, why should it be so to *regard* and *observe* us? Especially since he hath capacitated us for regarding and observing him.

But

But what profit or detriment, saith the principle, can accrue to him from us? I answer, none at all. But, doth it therefore follow, "*That we have nothing to do with him*" "*or he with us?*" Here also I would appeal to the *experience* and *practice* of those who hold this principle, for a confutation of it.

And I would ask them if they ever pray to God? I don't suppose such do it as an expression of obedience or homage: but do they not as a meer *natural* act, without any *previous deliberation*, implore the divine help in extreme danger, and seek divine relief under oppressions and straits? Do they not in many cases which are desperate, and which seem remediless as to human power, address themselves to heaven? And do they not constantly do this as from an impulse of *nature*, without reflection, without a prompter? Now certainly, it is as vain and ridiculous for them to pray in their *distress*, as in a way of *dutiful homage* to God, if he is wholly regardless of their affairs, and indifferent to their behaviour: if God hath forsaken the earth why have they recourse to him in their extremities, any more than at other times? If he take no notice of what we do, what sig-

nifies prayers under one circumstance more than under another? — But let such answer this also : why should they *feel* that powerful *instinct* urging them to apply to heaven, or why that *inwrought propension* in human nature to implore divine regards and to carry them to God, if it was not the design of him that implanted it to assure *that he could and did regard them* ? Why should they *involuntarily* lift up their eyes to heaven when they know not what to do, and when they despise prayer at all other times ; but that their maker *designed* this instinct in their very frame, as a testimony he *doth* concern himself with this world, and interest himself in their behaviour ? And if by their prayers they allow of the divine regard in one respect, why not in another ? If they allow that he regards those petitions extorted by distress, why should he not regard those which carry worship and homage in them ? And if God takes notice of prayer, why not of the good and evil actions of their lives in general ? since the one is no more inconsistent with his excellency and happiness than the other. However unwilling libertines may be to allow of a divine cognizance of their behaviour, as being

a rub in their way, and an unanswerable obligation to religion, yet I affirm, nothing can be brought against it, but silly and mean representations of the divine perfections; and every one hath that in their own frame, which, if attended to, would confute any principle that denied it.

S E C T. IV.

ANOTHER principle or counsel of the ungodly is this, “How can it be
 “thought that God should be displeased
 “with us for taking *little* liberties, or a *little*
 “pleasure? We don’t hurt him by it: nay,
 “we don’t *intend* any offence to him, nor
 “to do any thing in mere opposition to
 “him, but only to please and gratify our-
 “selves a little; at which such a good Be-
 “ing as he is can never be angry.” I have
 expressed this as I have several times heard
 it. If it were put into *plain English*, I think
 it would run thus, “How can we think
 “that any thing is displeasing to God that
 “is pleasing to us?” And when so put,
 it answers itself. But to be a little more par-
 ticular.

These *little* liberties, gaieties, and pleasures, as they are styled, are *moral iniquities*: this is supposed in the principle that I am endeavouring to expose. Now nothing of this kind can be *little* or *trifling*; and from the perfect rectitude of the divine nature we can most certainly conclude, that every thing of that kind must be as hateful to God as his threat'nings intimate. Let inclination then dress them up in any Terms of diminution, it cannot alter their nature; tho' it may facilitate the practice of them to the libertine, it can no way lessen the divine abhorrence of the actions, or of the persons who are chargeable with them: *that* is unchangeable. Such diminishing sentiments of vice were never dictated by understanding or reason; they are the pure language and effects of inclination. But there is not a more flagrant or more fatal delusion, "Than for us to judge of our actions by one standard, whilst God will judge of them by another." As for our *hurting* God by our vices, it is acknowledged we cannot; but we necessarily *dishonour* him by them: in their very nature they carry an insolent contempt and defiance of him, with a denial of the several relations

lations naturally subsisting between him and us. Now there is as much reason to suppose that this will be followed with the resentments of an holy wise and righteous governor, as actual hurt and damage sustained by another, can be supposed to be followed with the expressions of their displeasure, where they have power.—As for the *not intending any immediate affront to God* in their actions, whereby such arguers would colour the liberties they take, and screen themselves from the divine anger ; I would reply by asking, whether they do not *engage* in such liberties *with full intention*, whether they do not *intend the acts* themselves, and also whether they do not *know* at the time, “ that God hath forbid “ them ? ” I believe this won’t be denied. Why then, there must be “ an intention of doing an “ act known to be displeasing to God ; ” which, with the help of all their distinctions, falls so very little short of acting from an *intended* opposition to God, that in just construction it may be so deemed and resented by the righteous judge of all the earth. Those can never be justly styled *little* liberties which are intentionally at the expence of the divine honour and regard : and no one that

knows any thing of God, of the difference between good and evil, and who act not under the power of a dishonest heart, can think to wash away the guilt thereof by saying, “ they only intended to gratify and “ please themselves.” For, herein lies *the* guilt, “ that they did *intentionally gratify them-* “ *selves* in defiance of and in opposition to, “ the *known* will of their maker.” And can the very crime be an excuse? Can the very thing that renders them guilty before God, render them innocent too? Oh! how doth a love of vice blind and befool mankind!

S E C T. V.

ANOTHER council of the ungodly is this; “ The mercy of God is in- “ finite, and therefore tho’ they do take “ some liberties that he may not allow, “ yet they doubt not but that they shall “ find shelter and sanctuary in that mercy “ at last. *Such* a Being cannot be so severe “ as to punish them; for how can that mercy “ be *infinite* that doth not extend to them? “ Besides, can it ever be thought that God “ made any creature to damn it?” By this
many

many encourage themselves in a wicked way and by such a principle many, young persons especially, are in danger of being proselyted to vice, of becoming very free with it, and of contemning all the means of reclaiming them. For under the expectations of *such* a mercy, let the measure of their vices be what it will, there can be no apprehension of suffering, or fear of being called to an account.

If we meet with any such counsellors, let us ask them what they mean by *infinite* mercy: the term is delusive. Do they mean by it an *unlimited, a boundless* mercy, or one that will include *all* at last, let them be what they will? If they had ever taken counsel of reason, not to say of the gospel of *Jesus*, they would have known *such* a mercy cannot possibly be divine, or belong to God. Unless all our natural ideas as well as the revealed account of the divine nature fail us, God's must be a *perfect* mercy: that is, such a one as agrees to a Being, possessed of every other perfection as well as mercy. It is the mercy of wisdom, justice, truth, and holiness, and accordingly is ever exercised in perfect harmony with them. They are all of them but his simple essence; he is one as truly and per-

perfectly as the other. The absolute rectitude of the divine nature then must necessarily *limit* this mercy; the equally essential attributes of wisdom, purity, and justice must *set bounds* to the exercises of it. It is not a meer good nature; it is not a compassionate instinct which works as light flows from the sun, necessarily, or without choice and freedom: if this was the case, what gratitude would be due to God from us for his mercy? But, on the contrary, it is a *moral perfection* in him, the exercises of which are to be expected from him *only*, as wisdom conducts and determines, as purity admits, and as justice, or the preservation of his own rights, agrees therewith. This mercy is very great indeed, or as the scripture assures us, it greatly transcends the most perfect mercy and compassion that is found amongst men: but of course it hath its *proper* objects, to the exclusion of those who are not so. And whether this is likely to be a sanctuary or refuge to those who go in their iniquities upon the presumption of it, I think every one who can distinguish may be left to judge in a sober hour.

As for that other way of expressing this principle, “ Can it be thought that God
“ made

“ made any creature to damn it ? ” If the Question be, whether God hath made any creature with an *original intention or absolute design* finally to damn it ; I answer, no : detested be the thought ! I abhor it as blasphemy that nothing can exceed. * But if the Question

* I cannot forbear here entering a solemn caution against any *such like* imputation or thought of God : and that not only from the blasphemy and injury which it carries in it to his all-perfect nature, but also from the terrible consequences which it naturally draws after it upon the mind that embraces it. The worship of God, if it be real, both supposes and increases our veneration and esteem of him ; and the foundation of our honour and admiration must be the character that he bears *with us*, or the perfections which he is apprehended *by us* to possess. If now, arbitrariness, cruelty, unrighteousness, or any thing essentially evil be imagined by us, either to belong to the divine nature, or to be the subject-matter of God’s will and pleasure, there is very great danger of our being reconciled to those evils, from the veneration we pay the Being in whom they are supposed to subsist, and of our deriving from thence dispositions of the same kind. From whatever *accidents* it may be sometimes otherwise, I am sure there is nothing more natural and therefore probable, than for persons to lose their just abhorrence of those evils, if not to come to esteem them as excellences and virtues, when they have once cloathed God with such qualities, represented him to themselves *as acting* with them, and worship him *as thus represented* : and what is still more, as their veneration of *such a*
Being

tion be, whether any creature that God hath made, *will or can finally be damned*, or *not be the object of his mercy at last*? I answer, yea; and all that hath been suggested under this head is a proof of it. Meer mercy is no more a true idea of God than meer power. If his mercy is a *perfection* it must be limited; if it is the mercy of an holy, wise, and righteous Being it cannot be *boundless*: the principle then that ensures *mercy to all at last* must be as false, as that God is wise, holy, and just, is true.

S E C T. VI.

I WILL add one thing more as a counsel or principle of the ungodly, upon which they act, and by which they ensnare others: “ Tho’ we indulge at present, say they, in
“ sinful liberties, we can leave them when
“ we will: we can as easily quit as we en-
“ gage, and forsake them whenever we have
“ a mind to it.” Hereupon, when such are in company with those of tenderer minds and better principles than their own, who from thence refuse to run with them to excess,
they

Being rises, the danger of their reconciliation to and imitation of *such* evils increases.

they argue with them upon this principle, as if they had proved the truth of it; “ It is “ but for once and away, you need not “ make a practice of it.” And by this many have been initiated in vice, and their resolutions against it have been undermined and stole from them. But

Let us remember there is not a greater deception in the world than this, “ That a person who in any degree hath *followed* vice can “ quit it *at pleasure* ” Experience lies directly against it; and so universal is it, that I am persuaded no *single fact* can be brought in favour of this principle. Let persons pretend what they will, it is the difficulty of forsaking the practice that is the cause of their persisting in it. For, they are often exceeding uneasy with themselves, sick and weary of their course: they find their master is very hard, their wages very poor, and from a dissatisfaction with themselves they often resolve very firmly and sincerely, that they will engage no more.

Now, under such circumstances why don't they do what they say is so *very easy* to do? What prevents them? Not an approbation of their practice, not a satisfaction in their course: what is it then, but the *labour* of reform-

forming, the *difficulty* of quitting it? Every such person is a living confutation of his own principle, and one would think therefore it should carry its own antidote along with it.

I must insist upon it as the *only* evidence they can give that it is an *easy* thing to quit such practices, *that they do it*, when they know they *should*, and so frequently resolve within themselves that they *will*. Do they call the persisting in acts against strong and repeated determinations to the contrary, *a leaving them off at pleasure*? Language won't bear this; and what protestation is valid against constant fact?

The truth is, they know little of human nature, or of the nature of things; they are gross strangers to themselves and to the most obvious things in the world, who know not that every single deliberate act leaves some disposition in the mind towards a repetition, and that the disposition increases in proportion to a repetition. No one can tell what *one* compliance upon such a principle as this may introduce. The experiment is extremely hazardous: the bounds we may set to ourselves, it is great odds, will never be kept.

Instead of being at liberty *afterwards*, there is a proportional entanglement, a bias towards

a prosecution : every fresh engagement en-
creases the difficulty of a reformation, and
leaves a person still less of a power of acting
at pleasure. It is impossible it should be
otherwise, whilst humane nature is what it is.

— This principle is equally dangerous as
false : it is an artifice adapted to the service
of vice : it insinuates itself very powerfully
from its plausibleness, being calculated to per-
suade us, we may give a loose to inclination,
and follow our own gratification, and when
we are satiated and sick of it, or have brought
ourselves into the greatest hazard by it, that
we may at once retrieve all, and be presently
in as free and safe a state as before. But let
us remember it is a *meer* artifice ; and none
will find themselves more wretchedly deceiv-
ed than those who fancy themselves too cun-
ning for their sins.

S E C T. VII.

AS an improvement of this subject, let us
exercise the most religious care what
principles we embrace. It signifies nothing
indeed how just and true our religious sen-
timents are, if our practice is not conducted

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thereby ; but yet it is of the utmost consequence with respect to practice, that our principles are good ; those I mean, which are at the foundation of practice, and have a direct influence upon its being good or bad. By means of the gospel, those truths which are eminently at the foundation of a religious course are very clear and plain, approving themselves to every honest mind ; and would we but try every suggested principle thereby before we embrace it, if we *would not* be deceived, we *need not*. What the eye is to the body, that the understanding is to a person's actions. If that be blinded or corrupted, what wonder if we go astray. If the principles are loose, it is great odds but the actions are of a vicious kind : when they are only *consistent* with wickedness, how likely is wickedness to prevail ? How much more when in their nature they directly *lead* thereto ? Then, they give a seeming authority to our follies, uphold a looseness of manners, and strengthen us in our irregularities against all that reason and law, God and Conscience, can say.

I think to this subject that caution of our blessed Lord relates. *Take heed that the light that*

that is in thee be not darkness *, for, as he adds in another place, *if the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!* The meaning of which taken together may be this ;
 “ Take great heed that those sentiments and
 “ principles which are to guide thy course
 “ be not corrupt and false ones : for by them
 “ thou wilt be much more in danger of be-
 “ ing led astray than if thou hadst no light,
 “ no principles at all : if the light itself be
 “ darkness, if that which should guide, fe-
 “ duces, how much more *certainly* wilt thou
 “ go astray than if thou hadst no guide at
 “ all !” — For direction in this matter I
 would offer the following hints.

Let us judge of principles by their fruit and effect, or by their natural influence upon the christian temper and life. Sure we are, that the gospel in general is *a doctrine according to Godliness* †, that it is calculated entirely for the advancement of piety and holiness. Whatever principle is apparently subversive of this, can never be a principle of the gospel. I acknowledge, sometimes tho’ it is but seldom, those of a vitious tendency may be held, whilst yet the goodness of the heart

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or

* Luke xi. 35.

† 1 Tim. vi. 3.

or some better corrective principle held with it, prevents its natural effect : but still this is a good rule to try our principles by. Our Lord himself I think hath laid it down ; when, speaking of false prophets, and directing his hearers how to distinguish them from the preachers of truth and righteousness, he saith, *by their fruits ye shall know them** ; by the corrupt influence and effects of their doctrines. Good principles we know may be *without good fruit*, for by far too many hold the truth of God in unrighteousness : but may we not also say, they cannot *produce* what is evil, or have any ill influence upon practice. If therefore we meet with any in the world which in their *obvious direct* tendency would abate our regards of the great God, would lead us to question his veracity, to presume upon his mercy, to despise his grace, to be free with his laws, to mock at sin, to slight conscience, or render us fearless of temptation——in these cases, it is no venture to say, *they are vitious and wicked*.

Again ; in receiving or holding principles, let us see to it that it is reason and truth, and
not

* Mat. vii. 16.

not meer inclination that influences. Every vicious person may truly be said *to be governed by inclination*, and in no particular are they more in danger from thence than in respect of principles. When inclination is strong on the side of vice, it will naturally seek and suck in those principles that favour and support it: there is presently a plot laid for the blinding the understanding: there is always a readiness to take sanctuary in such sentiments as render a sinful practice easy; that blunt the force of natural principles, and destroy the tenderness of natural conscience. As to those principles that I have mentioned, I see not how any persons of tolerable understanding or common honesty can embrace them upon conviction: on the contrary, it is only *inclination* that suggests and countenances them; which never was intended to *guide* or *judge* in such matters. These principles certainly captivate at first, not by their *truth* but their *comfortableness*; not because they are *believed* but because they are *liked*: tho' I don't say but sinful affections may in time bring over the judgment to themselves; and indeed it is not presently to be imagined what corruptions and impositions

the understanding may suffer from inclination, or what bare-faced lies a man may tell to himself, and swallow them too, if they are but *comfortable* ones, or as the prophet speaks, when *they love and like to have* matters as they represent them.

Oh! the happiness of an honest heart, of a pious and virtuous mind! How safe its course! How good its guide! How bold its thoughts! How comfortable its reflections! How peaceful its progress! What a security hath it from itself and the divine grace, under its liableness to mistakes and to be imposed upon! It carries an antidote within itself against the contagion of *others* poisonous principles, and may promise itself that from God, which shall be its preservation from the damage of any of *its own* too: those which it may possibly thro' weakness entertain.

Justly may we dread the *government* of a vitious inclination: nor let us ever admit *that* to dictate, judge, or determine for us. Tho' a stander-by may be ignorant when it is conviction, and when it is inclination that influences in the choice of principles, yet we must know it ourselves; and what is infinitely more, God knows it: the God from whom every one's sentence shall at last proceed, which shall be

be governed by his own perfect knowledge of our conduct and character. When persons have a strong disposition to wickedness, they may find out principles sufficient for number and quality to countenance or encourage them, by taking off the restraints God hath provided, or by making them ineffectual: but they should remember withal, nothing but self-delusion can be proposed; they can only flatter and misguide them, and subject them to an overwhelming disappointment: they can be no apology for their practice, but a distinct article of charge and punishment at an impartial tribunal.

Finally, let us take care we embrace not any principles for the sake of those things that have no concern with the truth of principles themselves. The counsels of the wicked are oftentimes embraced purely for the sake of a general character which those persons bear for ingenuity, wit, or something of that kind: these make them go down insensibly; and oftentimes others, young persons especially, imbibe them upon the reputation of those who hold them. But what hath wit, humour, or any thing of that kind, to do with religious principles, or truth and
fals.

falshood? Will any one that *hath understanding*
 sacrifice it to another in a most *important* affair,
 because that other is a good jester, can tell a
 story well, or is allowed to be an ingenuous
 person? Would it justify me before God, or
 relieve me on a dying-bed under a dreadful
 survey of a past life, that I took my princi-
 ples of conduct from the most *ingeniously* wick-
 ed? Universal reason saith, no. Let us then
 hearken to a very wise man's advice, *cease*
my son to hear the instructions that cause to err
from the words of knowledge *. The *pretence* may
 be instruction, a bright thought, a new or a
 free thought; or it may be, an useful one;
 such as, how to sin and not to be in fault;
 how to stop the mouth of conscience, or shake
 off every restraint; how to be too cunning
 for sin, and too hard for God too—but,
 lend not thine ear to such wretched princi-
 ples: fly from the counsellors, abhor the coun-
 sel.—If our aim was but to please God, to
 approve ourselves to him, and get safe to hea-
 ven, we should be safe. For then, truth
 would be always sought, duty always loved
 and studied, we should keep as far as we
 could from the brink of danger, and in cases
 that

* Prov. xix. 27.

that were really doubtful should determine on the safest side : we should have the best security from every principle prejudicial to the christian life, and whatever errors of judgment we fell into they would never corrupt our hearts, or hurt us with respect to the divine acceptance. May we studiously aim at this disposition and character, and steadily maintain it ; then may we hope to be preserved from the error of the wicked, and to be conducted in the paths of righteousness unto eternal life ; for, “ if we would not “ leave God, he will not leave us.”

C H A P. II.

S E C T. I.

THE next step or stage that the text mentions in the progress of vice is, *the standing in the way of sinners*. By this is understood in general *a conforming to wicked practices* ; and this is the next step to, and the natural consequence of, wicked principles. When the understanding, which was originally designed as the directive faculty, is deluded and
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corrupted by false apprehension of things, it is but natural to expect the manners will be corrupt. When those principles are sucked in that assure us, we may unrestrainedly follow our Inclinations and yet be chargeable with no crime; that if we are but *prudent* in our vices we need fear no ill consequences; that we may violate the divine commands with impunity amidst all the divine threatenings from an *unlimited boundless* mercy to which we may fly at last.—When these principles, I say, and such as these are embraced, which lay the reins upon the neck of inclination, and at once deliver from all check and restraint, how boldly may persons engage and persist in a vicious course, and how absolutely are all commands, that they do not like, dispensed with? If we take this expression of the psalmist in its general import, it is, as I said before, descriptive of *habitually vicious practices*: but as it here stands may it not also point to the more *particular way*, whereby such practices become most effectually and speedily habitual? I mean, *the seeking the company and acquaintance of sinners*: putting ourselves in their way, associating with them, contracting intimacies and friendships. When once the under-

understanding is corrupted by vicious principles, the mind naturally receives a bias to *wicked company*: the inclination to vice, that befriends such sentiments and makes way for their admission, disposes to such associates; and then our stated experience tells us, vice gains a surprising ascendancy in a very little time.

I shall consider the expression in this view: but that I be not misunderstood it is necessary to observe: whilst we are members of society, and follow the several employments providence hath fixed us in, it is impossible but we should be thrown into the way of the wicked, and led in some measure to converse with them: nay, even relation and kindred may render this unavoidable and necessary. But this is *endured*, not *chosen*, by a serious mind, and so far indeed it is to every one an unhappiness and not matter of crime, The standing in the way of sinners, which I am speaking of, is the *choice* of such company, the *throwing ourselves* in their way, or a *voluntary* associating and herding with them. It is an old saying and a true one, That a person is known by his company, or by those he is most intimate with, and takes most delight in:

in: and it is as true, that this doth not only *discover* persons, but *moulds* and *forms* them.

In considering these words as one of the stages of wickedness, I shall endeavour, I. To shew the influences that this *standing in the way of sinners*, hath upon a likeness of manners and practice. II. I would reply to some pleas that may be made for such intimacies and friendships, to evade the force of reproof or reasoning with such. III. I would offer some advices.

S E C T. II.

FIRST, I would shew the influence that this standing in the way of sinners hath upon a likeness of manners and practice.

I. The being conversant with their ways and manners hath of *itself* an insensible influence upon the mind and practice. The all-wise God himself designing to preserve the people of *Israel* from idolatry takes this method, not to suffer the Canaanites *to dwell in the land lest they made Israel to sin*, or, lest they should infect *Israel* with idolatry from their sojourning or being conversant with them*.

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* Exod. xxiii. 33.

The language and manners of those we stately converse with *insensibly* become our own, and what the eye and ear are accustomed to, makes deep impressions, and transforms before we are aware. How many have fallen, and daily do fall, into vices to which they have *no* natural propension or no *peculiar* propensity, but meerly from imitation? Without dispute this is the way by which PROPHANE SWEARING is propagated; since there is nothing in any constitution to lead to it, since there is no pleasure or profit pleadable as a temptation to it: it is caught purely by company, taken up meerly from its being the constant language of associates.

Nay further, were a person, sincerely or eminently pious, accidentally to fall into the company of those who derided the most awful things, who could scarce speak without throwing out some extravagant thing against religion, or who allowed themselves all manner of liberties with what respected the awful God and the eternal world; this *at first* most probably would awaken his zeal, fill him with detestation, and rather *raise* his piety than abate it: but let him *frequent* such society and be often with them, and you will see him soon

as languid as before he was warm, and what at first quite discomposed him, at length shall not at all move him. Daily experience tells us, use would reconcile thereto, and *meerly* thro' a customary hearing of those things they would lose their horror without any expence of pains; the very familiarity would be sufficient: and when the horror of the thing is taken off, the foundation of a reconciliation and resemblance is laid. The methods and ways of the company that we keep are so insensibly glided into, without any design on our part, that oftentimes others discern the copy before they do who wear it: it insinuates and gains like a contagion. 'Tis hazardous even for the best established in piety and virtue to be intimate with vice, or familiarly to intermingle with those of that cast. Such a scene being continually before the eye, and the mind accustomed to it, at last the things themselves are aped and the mind is reconciled to them: so that *meerly* by being in the way or company of sinners there is a resemblance of them surprizingly contracted.

S E C T. III.

2. **B**Y conversing familiarly with such we see vice set off to the best advantage; and thereby the practice of it is more powerfully recommended. Some inclined strongly to taste vitious pleasures may find a very considerable restraint from a natural *timorousness*: upon the presentment of an opportunity their fear is roused, and it may be hath hitherto been their preservative: but by *associating* with those who let no such opportunity slip, they are embold'ned. When so many venture before their eyes from time to time without hesitation, and without any apparent suffering by it, they are induced to venture too. This fear amidst these bold examples appears, as it never did before, like *Meanness* and a *Littleness* of spirit; probably it is so represented by their companions: from hence a conformity to them comes recommended under the notion of *courage* and *magnanimity*.

Others, tho' they find a strong propensity to some vices are restrained by a native *shame*, and from a sense of the reproachfulness and scandal of some iniquities, joined with the

apprehension of being discovered, they have kept themselves free. But, when they come to herd from time to time with those who can *glory* in their shame, who can make a *merit* of their reproach, who can *boast* of their exploits, and probably affect to appear more vitious than they really are—in such circumstances, vice assumes the appearance of *glory*; a light in which they never before saw it: it seems to have changed its nature and to become an *ornament*, since it furnishes so much pleasantry for conversation, and seems such a qualification for it. The *sharing* in the laughter and jollity of such companions by mingling with them makes their way appear right, or at least renders their course engaging: their mirth transfers such an appearance of innocency on their course, or at least so far removes the deformity and malignity of it, that the former shame is beguiled and set aside, and from better thoughts of it they are induced to an imitation.

There are many also whose lives are very vicious, who yet have some amiable natural qualities: such as civility, wit, good-nature, chearfulness, beneficence, and humanity.

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These qualities, by associating with the persons whose they are, appear in a very strong and engaging light. By this means these too often cover the deformity of their vices, throw a vail over them, and even secure a reconciliation with them. The softness of a behaviour, an agreeable courtesy when it is continually beheld, makes the poison of the example in other respects go easily down: a natural goodness of temper often fatally recommends a very bad practice to an associate: from a pleasure taken in the *man* how easily do we proceed to an approbation of his *vices*, and from approving to *imitating*? The approbation of vice in this case may not be formal and distinct, but there is such an undistinguishing liking taken in general to the *man*, that his very vices are recommended too. The tacking some idea together in discourse which surprize a little, and annexing a laugh thereto, shall soften the great prophaneness and indecency of a discourse, and for the sake of the wit it is much but we put up with the wickedness of it: nor is it unlikely, that from the pleasure conveyed by the one, we shall mimick the other. Vice, when it is thus set off and accompanied, borrows a *seeming* lustre and ex-

cellency, though it hath not a gleam belonging to it; at least it hides its own deformity, and the natural qualifications of the company insensibly convey the contagion of their conversation.

Again; many of the vicious pretend to be *advocates* for their practice, and they use great art and industry to recommend their way of life: they take a sort of pride and pleasure in making profelytes. They will rally the principles of education, and endeavour to work upon a natural shame to throw them off. They will tell us, “ that a fear
“ of vice is nothing but prejudice and pre-
“ possession, or that our ill opinion of it is
“ entirely owing to our having never tried
“ it; whilst at the same time they will boast
“ of *their* hearts desire, and with an air bless
“ themselves in their pleasures and advantages. They will draw some tempting
“ scenes, and set off their course with great
“ flourish, adorning it with the characters and
“ ascribing to it all the present consequences
“ of virtue.” Hereby things are suggested that would never otherwise have been thought on in favour of vice; a picture is given of it that would never have been seen in the transient view of it in the life: and
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what person, especially young ones, with warm passions is qualified from education, reading, or thought, to see through the sophistry, or to detect the delusion? At least, how gladly will they catch at such a representation when held out to them in favour of what their inclination befriended too much before, and how much more resolutely are they likely to engage, when, as they apprehend, vice hath so much more to say for itself than they ever imagined?

Thus doth converse with the wicked set off vice to the best advantage, inducing favourable thoughts of it, in opposition to all that the word of God and the counsel of the best suggest, and very peculiarly by this means exposes a person to tread in their steps and walk in their way.

S E C T. IV.

3. **T**HE rules and terms of friendship, which are generally thought decent to observe, influence greatly towards a resemblance of minds and manners. It is a term of friendship, in general thought reasonable, " That we accommodate and suit
" our

“ ourselves to our friends, that we endeavour
 “ to be as civil and agreeable as we can.”

And when any are picked out as associates, 'tis but natural to suppose there will be a *desire* of appearing as agreeable to them as they are to us. From hence is that saying of one of the fathers verified, “ If persons
 “ good and bad be joined together in a special bond of society, they either quickly
 “ part, or they become alike.” Now, supposing an intimacy with the vicious, how is it possible that the terms expected to be observed in friendships should be kept to, without conforming to their general subjects of conversation, and to the practice of such a society? and what doth experience tell us they are?

How often hath an *inward abhorrence* of some conversation and behaviour been smothered and suppressed for fear of becoming disagreeable, or of being charged with a breach of good manners? This hath paved the way for something further; and hereupon I may justly add, how frequently have some, of better minds and greater remains of virtue than the rest, been led *actually to join* in those things, at the commission of
 which

which their hands have even trembled and their hearts ached? and this purely thro' fear of being accounted unfociable, of breaking company, or of being despised by their associates. Demands of conformity are made upon the foot of good-breeding and civility, and whatever the discourse or the practice on foot be, it is expected that all sink to the level of the majority, upon pain of being charged with rudeness and ill-manners. And Oh! how hath reason, conscience, fine sense, and strong religious sentiments yielded and been sacrificed hereto! to dissent, is interpreted to set up for being wiser and better than the company: this is accounted a *reflection*, and is treated as such: insomuch that if any persons, how different soever in mind, taste, and manners from the worst, will associate with them, they must by the rules of *such* societies not only suppress their better thoughts and more virtuous conduct, but must sink into a conformity to others, that they may be qualified for their company.

It may be said indeed, "that *no* rules of friendship oblige a person to run *all* *lengths* with his company." This is very true in itself, and will be allowed in the case
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of *virtuous* friendships. But it is in vain to dissemble it, that a desire of the good opinion of our company is in a great degree inseparable from our choice of it: and when this company is of a vicious kind, by what can we think to procure their good liking, but by at least an appearing resemblance of minds and manners? Where there is not this, but a person shall remonstrate and protest from time to time, what can he expect less than to be the BUT of their jests, and the object of their common scorn, which is not easy to bear, nor indeed is likely to be ventured when it is their good-liking that we seek. And tho' some who have associated with the wicked have rationally and religiously protested and dissented from some of their practices, yet this hath been seldom or never but *at first*: if they have continued their intimacy with such, their remonstrances and dissent have soon been over; either from the torrent of sneer and satyr they have been born down with, from the fear of being charged with ill-manners and spoiling company, or their own reconciliation to it. The usual ground of such intimacies will scarcely admit of a dissent from their vices: for vice itself in one
 shape

shape or other is the general cement of such a friendship ; *conformity* therefore must be its maintenance and support.

S E C T. V.

4. **T**HE standing in the way of sinners, or associating with them hath a very considerable influence upon our minds and manners “ as God is concerned in the “ matter.” I am fully satisfied in my own mind, that there is not only a natural providence which maintains and supports the general system of nature, and a providence that directs and conducts temporal events amongst mankind, but that there is, if I may be allowed the term, a *moral* providence ; by which I mean interposition, influence, and assistances from God towards our improving our moral advantages, and our escaping the influence of those snares to which we are unavoidably exposed. I see nothing in this to clash with any divine perfection, nothing inconsistent with God’s government of reasonable beings, as free and accountable creatures ; nor can I understand many passages

sages of scripture but upon the supposition of this as truth.

Now if we allow that there are divine interpositions and influences subservient to our preservation from the evils of unavoidable snares and temptation, then there is a foundation for this head, “ That the customary
“ associating with sinners will most probably
“ introduce a conformity to them, as God
“ may be concerned in the matter.” For, such have no just ground to expect any divine interposition in their favour, because it is *running* into the very mouth of temptation and danger : it is a *wilful* exposing of themselves to hazard, and God may justly leave them to the immediate consequences of it. Their behaviour is a great provocation : hopes and expectations of safety from any thing on God’s part, in such cases, are not only vain but criminal, and may most righteously be answered by leaving them to themselves.

And how much good then may one wicked companion destroy ? How soon will a mind, however before furnished, be laid waste and in ruins, when a person lies under the continual droppings of such instructions,
exam-

examples, and various solicitations, with the help of its own inclinations, and all divine interpositions are withheld? 'Tis fond presumption to expect any divine succours when we knowingly and of choice go out of God's way; and as to such company we may say, God is no otherwise there, than *by his observing eye and displeased look*. And if those influences, ministring by the faculties of our own minds, towards our restraint and preservation are withheld, as indeed they are *forfeited* by running ourselves into temptation, will not the evil spirit that worketh in the children of disobedience soon gain an established dominion? especially where the means themselves with which persons are conversant, are in *their nature* adapted to hurry on to the utmost lengths of wickedness, as the standing in the way of sinners is adapted to do. These Things considered, I apprehend the wise man will be thought to speak like himself when he declares, *That a companion of fools shall be destroyed* *.

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S E C T.

* Prov. xiii, 20.

S E C T. VI.

BEFORE the reader proceeds any farther, I would request him to make a pause, and seriously to reflect on the nature and consequences of the thing I have been treating of. What I have been aiming at is, “ to excite a religious care as to the intimacies we contract, and the company that we keep.” This as far as I can judge, is of general use, and of as great importance in respect of our present and future happiness, as any thing we can employ our care about.

Experience and observation give sufficient testimony, what waste and desolation in minds *company* makes. What vice and vanity, which are terms pretty near akin, have by this means taken the place of very blooming promising excellencies! What hath been suggested already in this chapter, was designed to convince of the *peculiar* influence that friendship with the wicked hath upon our minds and manners. I appeal to every one’s reason, or experience, or observation, as they are qualified to judge by one or more of these ways, whether there is
any

any one article to which more vice and misery may be imputed than to this? All the ways of judging of the nature and tendency of things must fail us I think, or we must have lived in a very unthinking state, if it is not matter of certainty with us, “ That nothing more effectually lays the ax to the root of all the goodness that education or other advantages may lay the foundation of ; nothing makes a *quicker* dispatch both of principle and conscience, or more *speedily* finishes an abandon’d miserable creature.” Let any foundation of piety and virtue be laid, I fear not to affirm, such a friendship destroys it all, and in a very short time too. And it is a standing confirmation of this, that when the principles of education or early impressions have sat uneasy upon persons through the strength of vicious inclinations, or have recoiled upon their gratifying them, they have immediately run to such company as the most effectual expedient to rid themselves of those restraints, and to divest themselves of *bated* truths.

It is certain, man is a sociable creature as he is a rational one ; and it may be, the mind seldom unbends itself with so much pleasure

as in the conversation of a suitable friend. Perfect solitude to such a being would turn a paradise into a desert. But might we not expect to find such a Being using his reason in the choice of friendships and intimacies, as faithfully as in any other affairs of life? Was it ever intended mankind should engage as the brutes run into herds, that is, associate with the first they meet, if they are but of the same species with themselves? Or can this be reasonable, wise, or safe? The Gospel also requires Civility and Courtesy to all as a branch of its lovely temper; but can we not exercise this consistently with a wise and rational distinction of persons in our choice of intimates? Persons may be overrun with and at last lost by vices, which, we may say, are of their own growth, or which are not caught or copied from others; and these may haunt and rule them tho' they should betake themselves to a wilderness or cloyster: But how great is the majority of those who may and do lay their ruin upon their *company*? The broken hearts of wise and good parents, the bitter lamentations of relatives, the bleeding sympathy of friends over the multitude that are destroyed this way,

way, setting out in the most promising manner, are a continual and pathetic plea for the greatest care in this respect. Of the many unhappy creatures who die at a gallows, most of whom thro' their vices are but a degree above the brutes in point of reflection, yet how few of those go out of the world, without declaring that their *company* hath had the principal influence in rendering them what they are, and in bringing them to their untimely end? and those of them who have had the best education, and are of the best understanding, are most free and open in this acknowledgment. I see not, I confess, wherein it would be a reflection upon the wisest and the best to admit their evidence, and to take their caution. Surely we ought to believe there is a rock, and to dread it too, where we see so many wrecks! Amidst the many scriptural warnings against iniquity, do we not in all of them hear a voice saying, *stand not in the way of sinners*? For, we should always remember, that a warning against the *end* is a warning against the *means*; and the obligation to regard the one infers equal obligation to regard the other. An indifferency or an undistinguishing behaviour in

respect of our company, betrays great ignorance or great contempt of God and our immortal souls, which by associating with the wicked will infallibly grow. Wherever the fear of God is in any degree, and there is a sincere desire of having a conversation becoming the gospel, that is, where there is the *lowest* degree of sincerity, the congregation of evil doers will be hated*. And this which is an *evidence* of our goodness would be a considerable means to *preserve* it. In short, where the standing in the way of sinners is matter of *choice*, be the pretension what it will, farewell to wisdom, peace, and safety, so far as eternity is concerned in them: but, so far as we are *cast* upon dangers of this kind by providence in our situation, employment, or alliances, so far we may hope for preservation, whilst it is our governing ambition to be true to God, and to be faithful unto death. Whilst we keep in his way, which is the way of duty, we may expect he will keep with us: and since herein lies a considerable part of our security, let us exercise that watchfulness as to this and every other *share* as may engage our God with us, so as

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to preserve us from the evil influence of every temptation in every state, and lead us thro' life under the smiles of conscience, and the joyful prospect of a better world; where all are one as to friendship with God, and from thence, perfectly secure and happy one in another.

C H A P. III.

HOWEVER obvious a little consideration would render it, however certain constant experience proves it a truth, "That
 " associating with sinners hath a very great
 " influence upon our resembling them in
 " mind and manners;" yet inclination hath invented several pleas to countenance and defend the practice; which may also seem at first sight to justify the running the hazard. From their plausible appearance it is requisite to take notice of them, and under each I shall endeavour to shew their fallacy and weakness.

S E C T. I.

First Plea. **S**OME may say, by conversing freely with such they have an opportunity of doing them good, of reproving them for, and correcting those things in them which are faulty and sinful, and the stricter the friendship is, the more likely, say they, are we to prevail upon them.

Reply. It must be acknowledged, that doing good is one of the noblest ends that reasonable creatures can propose to themselves: it is an end in perfect agreement with the general design of the most perfect being; and the doing it in that way which the plea proposes is in the truest manner to concur with the Saviour of the world, the great pattern our religion proposes to us, who went about rescuing souls from the bondage of sin and Satan, and therein from present and everlasting misery. And tho' we may not be finally successful, yet when our fellow-creatures appear posting to ruin, it is no small service to check them in their course.

But the question is, whether the way to effect this or any further degree of good
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upon them is *by becoming companions and intimates of such?* I apprehend it much otherwise. We may have sufficient opportunity for this, if we are really disposed to it, upon the foot of an *acquaintance* only. It is fit indeed they should be convinced of our goodwill towards them, in order to the influence of what we say ; and this they may be by a general concern to serve them in lower matters as we have opportunity. A refusing an intimacy with them, instead of lessening our capacity of serving them in the way the plea proposes, will rather be a qualifying us for it. For, thereby they will see themselves continually reprov'd, and our not associating with them as chosen companions is in its nature adapted to work shame and confusion in them. This is according to the Apostle's rule, *If any man obey not our word, note that man. How ? have no company with him that he may be ashamed.* But to prevent extremes he adds, *Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother* †. He would not have them *fly all* converse, or withhold civil regards which might lead him into prejudice against them ; but he at the same time re-

monstrates

† 2 Thess. iii. 14.

monstrates against *an intimacy*, the refusing which was likely to bring him to shame and amendment.

Indeed, they must be great strangers to themselves and to human nature, who know not that by intimacies with the licentious the best morals are greatly endangered ; and that let a person commence a familiarity with ever so good a disposition or view towards them, the sober are far more likely to become converts to the licentious, than the licentious to become converts to piety and virtue. And when the virtuous are once gone over to their practice, the disposition to do them good, as well as capacity for it, is at a full end: there will be no heart to it ; there can be no grace or propriety in it. So that by intimacies with such, the opportunity for doing them good is more likely to be lost than gained, and by the strictness of the friendship there will be less disposition to reprove from a familiarity with their extravagances : or if they are rebuked they will less regard it, from one who hath rendered himself cheap and mean from *some* unjustifiable compliances with them, which he can hardly avoid.

S E C T. II.

Second Plea. **T**H E R E are none, say others, so bad but I may get some good by them. I may improve my understanding, may learn a great deal of wisdom, refine my way of thinking, or be better qualified for my own particular business and profession. These are universally allowed very commendable views; and is not a person justified in the prosecuting them?

Reply. Doubtless these are very laudable ends in themselves, and a person is to be commended highly who hath proposed them deliberately to himself; nay, 'tis very probable that some, whose lives are the most licentious, may be peculiarly capable of assisting herein.

But let us consider; are these things so valuable as to be purchased at *any rate*? If sensuality of mind and practice accompany learning, ingenuity, and a good understanding in our acquaintance, those accomplishments render them the *more dangerous* companions. We are not at first sight aware what such engaging qualities may serve to
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introduce or reconcile us to, when they are resident with immoralities. It is very difficult for a person to frequent the society of such, or to chuse an intimacy with great knowledge and great wickedness, and not to take down the one with the other. And what, I pray can a person receive that shall be a compensation for the loss of his piety and virtue? Surely, more depends upon them than upon any thing else! And when they are gone, natural or acquired accomplishments do but the more expose the sinners unreasonable course, and aggravate a final account? That person must have a very great value indeed for thoughts and words, who can risque his religion and heaven for them; who can surrender them for the pleasure of a fluent tongue, or exchange them for the entertainment or possession of ingenuity. Would not reason bear us out if we should say, "it is madness to sacrifice innocence for
 " any tree of knowledge, or to give up a
 " virtuous mind in exchange for any science
 " or skill in the world." The odds between these are so great, that the person who risques the former for the sake of the latter may truly be said, "to stake all against nothing."

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But besides; are knowledge and other qualifications that entertain and improve so *confined*, that we can attain them *no where* but amongst the licentious, and amongst them *no otherwise* than by associating continually with them? Cannot they be compassed as effectually, and much more safely in another way? Will not religion and ingenuity grow in the same soil; that persons must *needs* herd with the irreligious in order to their improvement and entertainment? Certainly *others* may be found out, from whom as much might be got one way without paying so dear for it another? But were it otherwise, as I am sure it is not, if my advice were asked in that case, it should be this; “let all go rather than the wisdom and pleasures of piety, the peace and entertainment of a conscious virtue: live in ignorance rather than live and die in wickedness.” We may adhere to it as a truth of equal evidence and importance with any we can learn from the most knowing, “That all the improvements, the intellectual or civil advantages that we can compass in an whole life, are bought by far too dear when purchased with the loss of religion and virtue.”

Were the advantages from such a company a thousand times more than they are fancied to be, the time is near at hand, when they would all cheerfully be given up for the recovery of that possession and enjoyment *of ourselves* that was bartered away for them. In truth, *they* are no way *fit* to be made intimates of by one who understands the dignity of his own nature, who demand the renouncing of present peace and future prospects as the price of their acquaintance: for, what can they communicate that can be an equivalent? After all; the fear of the Lord *that* is wisdom, and the departing from evil *that* is understanding*.

S E C T. III.

Third Plea. **T**HAT which is a snare to another may not be so to me: every person is not alike: there is a great variety and difference in the natural turn and disposition of the mind, which renders that a temptation to one that is not so to another. For my part, may some say, I have conversed long with some of the worst
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* Job xxviii. 28.

and have found no damage from it; and therefore in this case every one must judge for themselves, and act as they find it with themselves.

Reply. I readily allow this difference between some and others as to disposition and the cast of the mind, from whence some find little or no present Inclination to, or present danger from, being conversant with some vices, by which others at the same time are carried away: outward circumstances also may make this difference. But, have we not many instances of persons being insensibly corrupted and drawn away, by length of converse, into those *very* vices against which they seemed strongly guarded by nature, to which they seemed to have *no* disposition, and to which, according to the plea, they for some time found *no* temptation? Have we not seen the natural disposition strangely alter? How hath a native modesty been conquered, and a very unexpected boldness been introduced? How hath a native sweetness and gentleness of mind been lost, and an obstinate stiffness and stubbornness taken its place; And this purely from the influence of company. Now as these dispositions belonging to the natural frame were considerable preservations from

many vices, so they being lost and their contraries taking place, a way is made for the admission of those vices, however opposite they have been to the *former* turn of their minds: and from hence those things become temptations which before were none.—But if any should still persist in it as fact, “ that they
 “ have kept up an intimacy with the vicious,
 “ and have found no damage from it.” I have these two things to say in reply, which I think deserve to be considered.

I. It is very probable such are not so sensible of hurt or damage in this respect as they ought, nor have been so careful in their observation of themselves as they should. The point is, “ What do they call damage?” I here suppose the person thus pleading to desire the character of a religious person. And upon this supposition I would intreat such impartially to reflect and observe whether this company of theirs from whence, as they say, they have sustained *no hurt*, hath not greatly impaired their seriousness and their regard to God and religion? Hath it not brought them to a great indifference about their duty, whether they discharge or omit it, and introduced a general neglect of their conduct, as
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Far as the laws of God are concerned? Have they not by that means lost much of the tenderness of their conscience, and become reconciled to many things that they once *justly* started at? Do not these now live very much by rote and custom, who *once* lived by rule; consulting the pleasant and unpleasant, the profitable and unprofitable for this world in their actions, instead of the good and evil of them, as *once* they did? Once more; is not the religion that they have, just of that form which the *chance* of conversation and company gives it, and just to the degree which that permits? If the case be thus, I must beg leave to say, whatever *their* sentiments are, they have sustained *great* damage; and tho' they may not yet have been partners with others in their *disgraceful* vices, they are in a fair way for it. To hint a parallel case as to this world. Every wise and thinking person will allow, *that* company had done a man a great deal of mischief, that had made him idle and quite indifferent to his business, or whether he went forward or backward in the world, tho' it had not yet brought him into any of the *expensive* vices. For every one I believe can see the natural connection between these,

and that tho' the person was not yet extravagant in common estimate, he could not be long otherwise. In like manner, a very slender regard to a divine Being, indifferency and carelessness as to our behaviour, the loss of fear as to sin and temptation, are as truly a degeneracy from a state of religion, and the high-road to scandalous vices, as a neglect of business is the road to poverty, and to the expensive vices of lewdness and drunkenness. If persons therefore will not account these alterations in themselves, a considerable damage in their religious character, which I think are *inseparable* from vicious company, they must excuse those who impute it to the impairment of their understandings, as well as to the loss of their hearts and affections.

II. If such have stood in the way of sinners, and have not been really injured by being drawn to an imitation of their vices, they ought to look upon themselves much indebted to the divine interposal and influence. I think it would be just and beneficial to look upon it in this light. Now what is the lesson that this teaches? Surely this, “ Do not trespass too far, nor plead your safety hitherto as an argument for proceeding.”

“ceeding.” If God hath, as our blessed Lord hath taught us all to pray that we might be, delivered from the evil, from the mischiefs and sins that such company would lead to, yet their security may most righteously be withdrawn by their *continuing to run* into temptation. For in such a case, that petition “to be delivered from the evil,” is downright mockery. Whatever inclination may plead, we are not at liberty in this matter. For, if we have not, under intimacies with the vicious, been yet led to an imitation of their *enormities*, we must have sustained considerable damage, and contracted that which paves the way to them, or which, if not remedied, will issue in something as fatal for eternity: and we have the greatest reason to believe, that whatever was our security hitherto from their scandalous vices, will by the *continuance* of such an intimacy fail us, and that we shall resemble them in those articles which we at present detest.

S E C T. IV.

Fourth Plea. **I**F I converse not with all as they fall in my way, they will say I am morose and sour; and if I pretend religion or plead that against such a friendship, religion will sadly suffer; for they will impute all the moroseness and churlishness to that.

Reply. In order to shew the weakness of this let what I have already said be recollected: that I am not speaking against civility, courtesy, nor a beneficence towards the worst, as opportunity offers, nor consequently against that easiness and freedom in conversation which these imply, as we accidentally fall into the company of the vicious; but only against *chosen friendships* and *indulged intimacies*. It is also a very laudable care to do what we can that religion be not evil spoken of by our means, and particularly that it be not brought under that unjust brand of unfociableness, sourness, and ill-nature, to which its nature and influence is as opposite as light to darkness. But, this can be no further our duty than is consistent with other branches of

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of duty: for we have this standing rule, "Not to do evil that good may come." Now, none can walk circumspectly or by the rules of the gospel, but their behaviour is liable to be branded with some term of reproach, and thereby their christianity exposed to a reflection by those who walk in the way of their own hearts, and as seemeth good in their own eyes. The question therefore is, whether the reproaches are *just*; and if they be unjust, whether we should run an apparent hazard of our eternal happiness to avoid them. Put the case before us, of a person professing great regard to religion becoming an intimate associate of the vicious. It is not supposable but some things would be started or proposed, that must be very abhorrent and shocking to his better sentiments and more tender mind, if he is what he pretends to be. Should he express his dislike and enter his protest against this, it is great odds but his conscience and his religion will have some hard name given it: what way then hath he left to avoid these reproaches both of himself and religion, but an *entire* conformity to such company: but would this do? No, far from it: for if those who profess

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a great regard to religion should run the lengths of those who have discarded it, it is well known, religion would soon have a worse brand than moroseness, and they a worse character than sour or churlish. From constant experience it is found, that the compliances of the professedly religious with the vicious practices of others, which from intimacies can hardly be avoided, have, as by authority, subjected all *pretensions* to religion to the brand of hypocrisy; and have led their very solicitors and tempters to evil, when once they have prevailed, to charge their profession with being no more than a pretence to commit, or a cloak to cover the worst of practices.

It is the greatest absurdity therefore to contract *intimacies* with the vicious, (as the plea must imply if it is any plea at all for what I have been condemning) in order to *prevent* reflections on religion: since daily experience tells us, that is the way beyond all others to *load* it therewith: and such a one as it hath suffered infinitely more from than from any others. Suppose then, that a person be termed morose and sour for refusing such friendships, and it be imputed to his
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religion, as doubtless true religion will ever lead to such a refusal; he is no way criminal herein; it is an offence *taken*, and *not given*: it cannot be required of us to purchase a good word for religion in general, at the imminent hazard of our own in particular. If any will stile a fear of offending our maker, superstition; a care of our immortal souls, preciseness and humour; and an abhorrence of evil, ill-nature; they must: but we should be egregious fools not to be *obstinate* in this superstition, humour, and ill-nature: and religion would suffer infinitely more by our avoiding these thro' intimacies with, and an almost *unavoidable* conformity to such revilers in any really vicious practices, than it can possibly do by any of *their* reflections.

This plea indeed can be nothing but weakness or pretence and I fear that when such *mention* a regard to religion, they *mean* themselves; when they *talk* of rescuing that from censure, they only *mean* their own gratification and escaping personal censure. It looks to be more a dictate of vice than religion.—No; if the shunning such intimacies be moroseness, superstition, or any other hard thing which they will please to stile it, let us be
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more so: for to this conclusion we may come, and may most reasonably abide by it, “ Religion needs none of these recommendations or supports; reproaches can never be probably avoided by friendships with the vicious, but upon our going *all their* lengths; and if we do, it is great odds but they will be the *first* that shall reproach for that conformity.” This every one must see is infinitely harder to bear, than any we can sustain from shunning their friendship, since it will be seconded by conscience; and the sting of every reproach lies in its justice and truth.

S E C T. V.

VICIOUS friendships appearing so dangerous, and so entirely without plea and defence, as I hope they do to those who have carefully read so far, I trust it will not be unacceptable to those who are convinced thereof, if I subjoin some advices which may be serviceable to all either for preservation or recovery from them.

From natural instinct we go into friendships and intimacies, and, as I have allowed, there

there is hardly any circumstances wherein the mind so agreeably unbends itself, as in the conversation of a well-chosen friend. But since by carelessness or a wrong-turned mind our greatest pleasures and benefits may become mischiefs, I would suggest a few things for our more safe converse and familiarity with others : which, if good, are of the greater consequence, as our company hath so considerable an influence upon our minds and practice.

First Advice. Let us carefully see to the general state and turn of our *own* minds; that it be prevailingly good and holy. It then may be stiled so, when we have an inward abhorrence of iniquity and vice, and a settled relish and love to piety and goodness. Our security as to all the snares of conversation lies very considerably in the settled temper and disposition of our own minds towards the ways of righteousness and life. Unless that be good, we may say, humanly speaking, it is pure accident or chance if a person comes not out of *common* conversation the worse for it : but when our own minds are complectionally good in respect of their dispositions, it is an antidote like an excellent

constitution in the time of a common contagion. They will then lay hold of the good that is offered, improving it, and will be improved by it: they will feel a shock upon every appearance of evil, and an increase of their abhorrence from thence; be more quick at discerning any thing that looks that way, and meet it with a proper check and indignation. *To be out of the way of temptation* is a great advantage, but not equal to a heart fully set against all evil, and in love with goodness. It would considerably promote such a settled good disposition would we but frequently and deliberately consider the unreasonableness, disingenuity, and danger of vice; would we but set it before ourselves as an offence against the highest and best Being, most unbecoming ourselves as we are reasonable, and directly repugnant to our own interest as we are designedly immortal. Let us also to this end conscientiously and stately engage in those exercises of piety, which in their nature tend to plant and improve the fear of God, and a regard to him at all times; this hath a direct influence upon *habitual* goodness and holiness, by destroying our love of sin which is its strength, by securing

curing the aid of divine grace, and letting us into pleasures and advantages far superior to what vice can propose. And let us depend upon this so far as to make the experiment, “ That the more of the mind and
 “ heart there is in these exercises, the more
 “ their benefit this way will be experien-
 “ ced.”

Second Advice. Let us exercise a constant watch over our particular temper, and guard against the particular snares that may expose us to. We must be great strangers to ourselves not to know what it is: and as that hath a considerable influence in the choice of our company, for we generally sort with those who suit ourselves in that, so from their suitableness to us they have the greater ascendancy over us to betray us into extreams, and if vicious, they will certainly make an advantage of it.

Every kind of natural temper hath its advantages and disadvantages in respect of religion. The lively and chearful, when the mind is set right to God and goodness, are capable of more active service than others: but then on the other hand, they are exposed to levity, and froth, and to what comes

with the alluring face of pleasure. The sweet, civil, and gentle disposition, when accompanied with religion, is retained generally by the strongest principle of religion, by love, gratitude, and every thing that is generous: but this is also exposed greatly to a conformity to the company it is in: it renders it very difficult to deny or practically to dissent, even when it disapproves, and endangers the sacrificing conscience to apprehended forms of civility. It must therefore be of the greatest service to us, to carry about us a lively sense of our *prevailing* cast and turn of mind; to abstain as much as possible from all such company as we know will prey upon our weakness, will put our temper to the test, or make an advantage of it for sinful compliances. I think the lively and chearful should be much upon their guard in that company, where nothing but pleasure and mirth is proposed: the civil, affable, and obliging disposition should never but by necessity *frequent* that company, where it knows it shall probably be put to the difficulty of saying, no; or of denying, in order to preserve its virtue and innocency. In every company let us attend to our own
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temper, that it run us not into extreams with others; and let us religiously shun that company, which we have *found* to make an advantage of our disposition for a conformity to vicious practices.

Third Advice. Let us place all honour and happiness in what will secure us the approbation of God, and testimony of our own consciences; or, make that the standard of what is truly honourable and felicitating. Every principle that is a natural motive to goodness ought to be encouraged; but there is nothing more pernicious than mistakes as to *principles of action*. Applauses and characters from men have been most successful inducements to surrender reason and conscience, to betray into an universal conformity to company. It was the free declaration of one who bore the title of *nobility*, not less remarkable for his free accusation of himself under his sickness, than for the bold impieties of his health, “ that he was influenced
 “ to his extravagant language and his *formal*
 “ *defences* of atheism, by the affectation of
 “ being the *first-wit*; and that he was led
 “ on in that course from time to time by
 “ the applauses of his company, tho’ under

“ bitter and reproachful exclamations against himself, when alone.” Indeed, when honour and happiness is thus placed it quickly defeats its own end, and the result is *infamy* and *disgrace*. Let a person place his felicity in the opinion of the world, and ultimately seek the honour that comes from thence, he must as a means to his end accommodate his behaviour to their taste, and govern it by their maxims. He must study to do what is pleasing to the world ; and whoever doth so, must in many cases displease himself and God too, by doing what is really dishonourable. And what doth the applause of a croud signify, when a man is in disgrace with himself ? What is reputation abroad, when a man hath none at home, or with himself ? It is almost the condition of the world’s regard, that we follow their customs : their applauses are too commonly founded on resemblance of practice, and that none of the best, and lead those who affect them *as their happiness* to live by custom and common example.

Let us endeavour then to set our understanding right in this matter, that we may not be misled by popular but empty sounds.

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Reputation and honour are grateful to human nature, and are to be valued for the opportunity they sometimes give for usefulness : but then, their value and worth abundantly vary according to the quarter from whence they come. The applauses of the *idiot* or *ignorant* are justly deemed *contemptible*, from their inability to judge of excellencies, or to distinguish between them and their contraries: the applauses of the *vitious* are chiefly *scandals* and *reflections* from a supposed resemblance of themselves: none but the *wise* and *virtuous* have any honour to *give*, and that is only to be *taken* as conscience seconds it. Now, when, from this way of estimating, our hearts are set upon the honour and happiness flowing from the approbation of God, who only can make a right judgment of us, and esteem us according to our real merit, we are in a fair way of conversing more safely with others. Vitious examples *then* will want their chief motive; we shall neither fear the censure of the wicked, nor seek their applause; we shall find it much more easy to leave others where we think they leave God; and feel a warm resentment against every indignity offered to

to him, by whom we covet to be honoured, and from whom we hope to be happy : we shall then be free to follow conscience *against* custom and company ; our principle of honour will be *with* conscience, and we shall covet nothing from the world but what we can obtain with the approbation of God, and a well-done from our own hearts.

Fourth Advice. Trust to *no* company so far as to indulge a security. As to what generally goes under the name of *good* company, it is frequently termed so from what would not recommend it to a wise and good person. But when we do associate in a friendly way with those of a character for sobriety and a regard to God, let us not in confidence of safety give a loose to our temper, or be off our guard. The best of persons are not our rule ; for such may be guilty of indiscretions very little different from vice, and of carrying lawful matters too far. One may propose, and another, from the general good character of the proposer, may implicitly consent to what is in itself of no good report, and of a very evil tendency. In whatever company therefore we are, let us maintain our watch, and judge
of

of presidents and actions, not by the character of the person, but by the *nature of the actions*, and the denomination they have in the *gospel of Christ*. I fear indeed, if we go by this rule, we shall be obliged to stop short of the lengths that many run, who wear the general character of sobriety, and to enter a protest against the conduct of many as walking disorderly, who flatter themselves that theirs is only *christian liberty*. But *for this very end* I have laid down this advice : duty and safety make it necessary. *Absolutely* to trust or give up ourselves to the conduct of *any* company or society, is running a very great risk : none are *thus* to be trusted to, be their character what it will. If one, presuming upon absolute safety from his company, shall give temper or inclination a loose, others for the same reason will probably fall in therewith, and thereby folly and sin too may insensibly circulate. On the contrary, would every one in societies and in company of the best character, but be upon their guard against the *approaches* to vice, they might jointly contribute to each other's pleasure and safety.

Fifth Advice. Statedly reflect on what hath passed in company, and judge of it by the common standard of life and rule of judgment. In the heat and pleasure of conversation many things pass unattended to, which probably a calm reflection would give us a very different sentiment of, from what we had at that time. When our conversation statedly undergoes a scrutiny from ourselves, we are in the way to rectify former errors, which otherwise may be repeated from time to time till they become habitual, and the evil of them entirely overlooked: and a consciousness of this our practice will render us careful when in company, not to lead or *join* in any foolish talking and jesting which is not convenient, or becoming christians *: Such as defiles the mind, intrenches upon the honour of God, is a making free with divine laws, is a blemish and a sting to a reasonable mind upon reflection, or detracts from the veneration due to things sacred. These things may be unheeded at the time, but reflection would shew us their deformity: and if we are desirous of avoiding vice, or what hath any affinity thereto, and of

con-

* Eph. v. 4.

conversing innocently and safely, wherein there is always the most satisfaction, we should statedly review what hath passed, in the calm and retirement of our own minds.

Sixth Advice. Let us check and keep a strict rein upon our *inclination to company*, that it gain not an ascendancy, and introduce the natural and various mischiefs of its excess. This is as capable of excess as any other inclination, it is as often found in *its* excess, and then is attended with as fatal consequence. I fear many a single person and family too may lay their ruin in every sense, to what we usually stile *company-keeping*. The mind and heart is undoubtedly engaged too far this way, when it breaks in upon the hours of business, when the calling is neglected for its sake, when retirement is rendered a burden, or when all *leisure hours* are melted down this way.

Such indeed may say, “ They always
 “ take care that their company is *good*.”
 But to this I must beg leave to reply, “ Let
 “ the company be what it will, such a love
 “ and addictedness thereto cannot be good.”
 It is a very unreasonable and inordinate prevalency, and introductive to the greatest mischiefs

chiefs as to both worlds. All that know what real religion is, and to whom the gospel of Jesus allows the character and hopes of the religious, know also that it is not easy to secure and maintain the distinguishing character of a christian with all their care, watchfulness, and improvement of opportunities to that end. What is *their* title to a christian character then likely to be, over whom company hath this ascendancy? What are its natural effects? Why, observe it where you please you will find, that where persons have this unreasonable *itch*, to give it its best title, of *conversation* with others, that they have neither opportunity nor inclination, time or heart, to converse with themselves: they are strangers at home till they dare not return, their own thoughts and reflections being some of the worst company. From hence they derive such a levity and frothiness that they cannot admit a serious thought; and through a contracted incapacity and dislike of themselves they are averse to reflection. A pass, by this means, is opened to the mind for any thing to enter, and a total disinclination to recollection takes place: so that they cannot fix on any subject of a religious

religious nature to check an inclination, to correct any ill impressions that have been made, nor rise to any great ideas, how much soever they deserve their attention, or how necessary soever to their reformation or improvement. The closet becomes hateful, nor know they how to employ themselves when there: every thing is burdensome that is out of their circle of empty pleasures, and every thing grows above them that is above amusement. If long observation and variety of testimonies do not fail me, I am very certain, “ That
 “ we may as well expect to accomplish any
 “ end without the use of natural means, as
 “ to be truly religious without frequent re-
 “ tirement.”

Permit me therefore to press upon all who take this into their hands, especially upon younger persons, who are making their way, as is usually phrased, into the world, that they guard against such an *inordinate* love of company. Suffer not yourselves to be *betrayed* into it: remember it is capable of excess, it is easy to run into that excess, and then it is attended with as mischievous consequences as can well be imagined. The first inducement, I will suppose, is *good com-*
 I *pany;*

pany; but let me tell you, without a restraint upon this inclination, you will soon lose your *first* taste by which you choose your *first* associates: *any thing* at length will do *if it be but company*, and you will become as undistinguishing in your relishes, as you are undistinguished in your morals.—I beg leave to add, That the more I know and observe the world, the more astonished I am at some ways of education into which many, called *parents*, run. I mean, the leading and introducing children into all *manner* of company before they have any ballast of their own, before they can in any degree distinguish between truth and falsehood, shadow and substance, or between what *is* done, and what *ought* to be done. This I know is glossed over with the Term of *their knowing the world*.—But I would ask, what occasion is there for this knowledge? I would not willingly suppose that any *parents intend to teach* their children vice; but on the contrary, that they *propose* real accomplishments of wisdom and conduct by their method of introducing them into the world. But let me ask, cannot they be wise without having vanity and folly playing upon their senses, at a
time

time too when one may say, *they are nothing but sense and imagination?* Is vanity, folly, and vice to teach them wisdom and virtue? Cannot they be led into just apprehensions of what is right and good, without being familiar with evil, or are they to learn what is good by a familiarity with evil? May they not have a sufficient knowledge of the world to answer all the ends of their being sent into it, without being conversant with the *worst* scenes in it? With as much reason might it be said, however homely the Comparison be, that a person could not know the world *literally*, or as a system, if he was unacquainted with the dunghils. Why must they be eye and ear-witnesses of all the varieties and forms of vanity and vice? Do such parents know any thing of the world themselves, and not know that those things grow up so naturally of themselves, that they don't need to be *watered* and *cultivated* by such *pains* and *expence*? I would ask but one question more; do such parents propose to initiate their children into a *way of life* answering to *this* knowledge of the world? I own then the means is very apt, and they bid very fair for success; nay, I will defy them with all their authority

and skill to *prevent* their being of the same stamp with the world, or the vain and vicious part of it, to the knowledge of which they so industriously introduce them; and if the misery of their children both here and hereafter will break their hearts, they bid fair for it, and are richly entitled to it.—God help such poor young ones! if this be EDUCATION, *neglect* were more desirable! It would be *compassion* to their offspring to let nature alone. For, from the wretched effects of such a *laboured* perversion and corruption of their opening minds, there is little probability of a better issue, than that the Parents should in a little time ardently wish they had been childless; and the children, that they had never been born.

As the result of this chapter, may it be our care to possess our minds with the deepest sense of the all-knowing God, who is not only acquainted with our private hidden life, our secret haunts and company, but also with our *real* views and ends, our motives and designs, amidst all our *pretended* reasons for our associating as we do: let this thought be familiar, and then it is likely to have its efficacy. May we exercise a daily care, and by
daily

daily prayer engage the divine aid against the insinuations and influences of wicked examples ; and let us remember our prayers, “ that we give not the lie to them by running ourselves into temptation.” If any should take up this who have been carried away by wicked companions, and who continue to stand in their way, I would entreat them to remember, that their present course binds them down to be partners in their plagues as well as their pleasures : for with them, if you persist, will your souls be gathered at last. You cannot have any *solid hope*, whatever your presumptions are, of dying the death of the righteous, when you have lived with the wicked. The conversation of the wicked is an *education* for hell ; and they are surely in great danger, who are found amongst such as by their spirits and course are *marked* for vengeance. The wicked cannot upon the whole be friends here, tho’ they may be associates ; and the greater associates here, the worse partners hereafter. *

I 3

May

* There is a *social* instinct originally engrafted in the humane nature by its great author : and from this gravitation

May such who have *hitherto escaped* this and every such snare, from souls full of pity to the wicked as the most miserable, use their best endeavours for their conviction and recovery ; and, by an *improvement*, in goodness, may they live under the pleasing prospect of being one day adjoined to a blessed society, uncapable of sinning or of tempting : spirits pure and happy : pure, according

itation or tendency to society results *particular* attachments and friendships. But, all experience, as well as reason, demonstrates, that no *real solid friendship* can subsist between persons of immoral pursuits and practices : for, there cannot possibly be any real *esteem* one of another. With all the partiality that each man hath in favour of himself, no one can be the object of his *own esteem*, nor keep up a friendship *with himself*, under the consciousness of *his own vicious* character and course : he must from thence *contemn* and *abhor himself* : because it is solely the *moral* character that can be the amiable one in the estimate of the humane mind ; *that* only can be the object of its esteem and love. What then can the *seeming* friendships between the vicious be in *reality*, but a *confederacy*, or an *herding together* for sensual gratifications : such as is found in the brutal world amongst the same species, and for much the same purposes of lust, sport, or prey : Should we style this *friendship*, it would be a monstrous abuse of language, and a confounding the most distinct ideas. —

ing to the perfection of that glorious state which the gospel delineates and ensures ; and happy, beyond all possibility of influence from the mixtures and changes of this.

C H A P. IV.

THE last stage of vice, as the psalmist hath enumerated and ranged them is, “ The sitting in the seat of the scornful.” The expression itself sufficiently proves this cannot *suddenly* be the character of any : it must generally be the effect of time and toil too, since there is so much in nature itself, bad as it is, that must be struggled with and subdued, before ever a person can *sit down* in such a seat, or *give up* himself to such a society and practice as the scorners is. But, to this each of the foregoing steps pave the way. Seldom shall we find persons of loose and wicked *principles*, which was the first step, who are not also loose and vicious in their *morals*. These naturally dispose them to associate with those like themselves, which was the second step ; from hence they are easily led, and have but a little way to go to the

the seat of the scornful, or to *settle* amongst such, to join with them in their scorning as their customary practice. The connection of these things in their own nature is very evident, when they are attended to, how hard soever it be to convince those of the *first* stage that they are *in great danger of the last*. From the hard'ning influence of vicious company, indulgence to appetite and inclination becomes more resolute and habitual: this naturally prompts to a proportionable *opposition* to the principles of religion and dictates of conscience, nay indeed renders it necessary; since at times these must check and disturb them in their course; and nothing doth so effectually prevent all disturbances from them, as the ridiculing, or turning them into derision and jest. When persons can thus commence scoffers, the work is done at once; and as the other steps prepare the way to this, so when they have arrived at this, the character and practice as vicious is finished and compleated.—It may be proper here,

I. To enquire who these scorers are, or who are represented under that character.

II. To

II. To examine the ground and foundation of their principles and practice.

III. To shew the weakness and insufficiency of their pleas for this their practice, or which are usually made the reasons and occasions hereof.

S E C T. I.

L E T us first enquire who these scorers are, or who are represented under this character. And from what I can collect from the passages where they are mentioned, they seem such as had divested themselves of good principles, and acted under the influence of bad ones. Such as had brought themselves to deride and mock at both the principles and practice of religion, as the contrivances of the crafty and designing, or the dreams and fancies of the melancholy : invented to keep the herd of mankind in order, that the inventors might more easily manage them, and make their earnings of them. Nor was this only matter of private opinion, but they in great kindness endeavoured to free the world from those enslaving sentiments of religion and virtue,
good

good and evil, with their imaginary foundations and consequences. The method they still take for the accomplishment of this, is to *laugh at* all ties from or regards to divine providence, the immortality of the soul, the dictates or terrors of conscience, or the expectations of a future judgment. These are openly treated as fables and impostures; and of course every action or argument grounded on them is turned into ridicule. They themselves avoid every act that hath the solemnity of religion in it, and the very appearances of a regard to religion in others are treated as hypocrisy or design. If others scruple any act as evil to which inclination or interest invites, they treat it as errant folly; and all acts of devotion, all regards to divine institutions are scorned as the groundless prejudices of education, or a stupid slavery to empty forms: they insult over a fear of a divine Being as childish timorousness, and deride all other rewards and punishments of actions, besides *present* good and bad consequences. Thus they attempt to run down all religion both in the principle and the practice, and to laugh it out of countenance. From this deriding scorning humour

mour, they guard themselves against the re-
 proofs of the pious by contemning them,
 and fortify themselves against all amend-
 ment by scoffing at the means of reclaiming
 them. In the language of scripture this
 term of *scorners* or *mockers* describes the *very*
worst of men; such whose faith is ship-wrack-
 ed, whose very minds are corrupted, whose
 consciences are seared, who are entirely go-
 verned by their senses, humours, and passi-
 ons, and from a devotedness to vice are ma-
 lignantly set against all thought and evi-
 dence, excepting what feeds their humour
 and befriends their prejudices against religion.
 It's plain, from the frequent rebukes given
 to these sort of persons, that there were many
 of this tribe in ancient times: our experience
 tells us they are not extinct, but on the con-
 trary their number daily grows. It may be,
 that a behaviour so *common*, and countenan-
 ced by *numbers*, may not for that very reason
 appear to be so unreasonable and monstrous
 as it is in itself: It is therefore necessary and
 may be useful.

S E C T. II.

SECONDLY. To set this character and practice of the scorner more fully to view. In order to this I shall proceed gradually, desiring the following particulars may be considered and put together.

—— 1. The principles of religion, if true, are of all other truths of the most importance and concern to us. The principles I am speaking of are these.—“ The existence of an Almighty, perfectly holy, just, wise, and good Being, from whom all other beings are derived, from whom all receive their supports, upon whom all are absolutely dependent for happiness. —That this Being is the governour of the world, directs and disposes of all things, even the particular affairs of individuals ; he sees and regards our behaviour, and is pleased or displeased with us according to our actions.—Tho’ this body of ours is subjected to death and dissolution, yet the *principal* part of our composition is not liable to its arrest, but is designed and capacitated for another state of existence, capable

“ pable of pleasure or pain in the state of
 “ separation, and shall actually experience
 “ the one or the other in a degree beyond
 “ all its present conceptions, according to
 “ what the course of life in this bodily state
 “ hath been, either good or bad.—Tho’ the
 “ body by the decree of Heaven must die
 “ and see corruption, yet it shall be raised a-
 “ gain and re-united to the soul, at a day
 “ appointed for an universal judgment;
 “ when the happiness or misery of every
 “ individual shall be perfected, and the sen-
 “ tence shall be governed by the conformi-
 “ ty or disconformity of the individuals to
 “ the laws God hath given them to ob-
 “ serve, and their improvement or non-
 “ improvement of the advantages he hath
 “ bestowed upon them.” These things I
 say, if true, are of the greatest importance
 to us of any in the world from their very
 nature. I do not think there is a scorner,
 who hath any understanding left, but, upon
 the *supposed truth* of these things, will allow
 “ that nothing more concerning can enter
 “ into the heart of man.” Well then, may
 we not demand their allowing these things to
 be merely *possible*? They must be so, if they

carry no contradiction in them. Now upon the *bare possibility* of their truth, can any thing be more absurd and wild than scorning, playing, and jesting with them; than deriding those who profess to regard them, and who really esteem them as truths wherein they are concerned beyond every thing else? Surely such things, attended with a *bare possibility* of their being true, demand and deserve a fair trial by reason; since they are so adapted to the *comfort* and *well-being* of *intelligent* creatures, and must, if true, entail such *shocking consequences* upon the *scoffer*. Certainly they are not at once to be hissed off the stage, or trampled on upon the bare proposal. What reasonable person could mock at principles of such weight without examining their grounds, without enquiring soberly into them, debating the matter with that gravity which the importance of the subject requires? Or who of that character but would renew their enquiries, examine again and again, supposing they were not satisfied of the truth of these principles, because of their vast importance “ if they should be “ true.”—But some may say, “ they have “ considered and weighed, they have sifted “ them

“ them to the bottom, they have divested
 “ themselves of the bias of education, and
 “ have made freer enquiries than others have
 “ done ; whereby, as they say, they see fur-
 “ ther than others do : and upon trial these
 “ principles are found as light as vanity ;
 “ they do not find they have evidence to
 “ support them.” Supposing this to be fact
 as to any, yet their *scorning* is most unreason-
 able and indefensible under this circum-
 stance. For,

2. There is a *possibility* they may be true
notwithstanding their enquiries. The evidences
 of these things are so strong, since they were
 intended to be the foundation of a religious
 practice, that without a breach of charity I
 may say, “ the scorner’s enquiries have been
 “ very slight, very partial, and his conclusi-
 “ on very hasty. Nay, that inclination
 “ hath had a greater hand in forming it
 “ than reason.” But allowing that they
 have made enquiry, and can see no evi-
 dence sufficient to convince *them*, what is the
 conclusion they can *justly* draw ? Certainly
 they can go no further than this, these things
may not be true; they can conclude only with
 a may-be. Now if they only *may not* be

true, they also *may* be true: if there is but a possibility on their side, there is a possibility against them. But who, except a distracted person, could venture to scorn and deride such truths, when they themselves must own there is a *possibility* of their truth? Nothing can justify such a treatment of matters, so weighty in their nature and consequences if true, but the being able to prove them “absolutely impossible;” which no creature, that I have heard of, hath been hardy enough to undertake. Have these persons enquired into the foundation of these principles? But, have they at the same time been so free from prejudices as to be capable of discerning what foundation they had? Have they set themselves to the work with a *desire* of being convinced if they could? Have they given every thing its due weight that hath made *against* them, as well as what hath made *for* them? I must say, their very *scorning* is a just ground to suspect they have not. For, the scorner from his very disposition puts himself out of the way of satisfaction; he is disqualified for *impartial* searches into divine truth. “The scorner seeketh wis-
dom,

“dom and findeth it not.”* He hath
conceit enough to start objections, but he
hath not honesty or impartiality enough to
wait for an answer, nor to take up with an
answer when made. He is so fond of his
own opinion, and it is so much his *wish* and
interest that it should be true, that he natu-
rally throws contempt on every thing that
makes against it; he looks upon every thing
of that kind as upon an *enemy*, with abhor-
rence and dread, and therefore hath as little
to do with it as possible. † How can such

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a one.

* Prov. xiv. 6.

† I know none to whom Lord Shaftsbury's obser-
vation and reflection may more justly be applied, than
to those I am speaking of. His words are these.

I have often known pretenders to wit break out into
admiration at the sight of a raw, heedless, unthinking Gen-
tleman; declaring that they esteemed it the happiest case
in the world, “Never to think, or trouble one's head
“ with *study* or *consideration*.” This I have always
“ looked upon as one of the highest airs of distinction
which the Self-admiring Wits are used to give them-
selves. Now the Eccho which these exclaimers (against
thought and consideration) hope by this reflection to
draw from their audience, is, “That they themselves
“ are over-fraighted with thought: and have not only
“ enough for Ballast, but such a Cargo over and above
“ as is enough to sink them by its weight.” I am apt
how-

a one as this ever judge of truth? However destitute religion may be of foundation, of all persons the scoffer is most unlikely to detect it. If it is a deceit, it is not so obvious a one as to be seen thro' by any one that can laugh or break a jest. One should never think that it should be hid from the wise, honest, laborious enquirer, and be revealed only to those who have neither disposition nor capacity for enquiry, for want of humility or honesty.

Nay further, I affirm the scorner hath never made any due enquiries into the truths of religion, "if he doth not know there is
"a great deal to be said for them;" and if he doth know this, his scorning is intolerable: because, that is treating things which have considerable evidence of their being true, as the veriest fancies and most groundless impostures. If he doth not embrace them, they merit a better regard than mockery:
there

However to imagine that it was never these Gentlemen's *over-thinking* that oppressed them; and that if *thought* had ever really become oppressive to them, they might thank themselves for having *under-thought*, or *reasoned short*; so as to rest satisfied with a *very superficial search* into matters of the first and highest importance.

there is always a decency due to such sentiments tho' we think them not true. I hope it will be allowed, that scorning *proves* nothing; that reviling is not *disproving*: If so, after all there remains a *possibility* on the side of religious principles, and this very possibility, joined with the importance of the truths themselves, render this humour and practice perfect madness. Were there but just proof enough to *stir* though not to *stagger* an infidel; were the evidences of these truths but slender; were there but enough to prove them *possibilities*, which nothing but stupid ignorance can deny, it is a folly not to be conceived, because an hazard above every other, for any to take the chair of the scorner. But,

3. These truths are demonstrably very great *probabilities*. This, if made good, still heightens the extravagant wildness of their temper. And let any of this tribe, if they can, account for those marks of wisdom and design, the exact adapting of means to ends, and organs to use; the variety, harmony, and perfection that appears to their senses throughout the creation, “without setting a God at the head of all.” Upon these grounds of probability

bability, "that there is a God," which are very strong, let them, if they can, tell us, why this Being, who from the perfection of his nature is qualified, may not concern himself with the creatures he hath thought fit to produce? Why he, who is every where present and perfectly wise, may not direct and govern the world? Why he, who hath made an order of creatures, capable of moral government, may not *intend* to govern them, and make their happiness and misery to depend upon their pleasing or displeasing him? With which of his perfections can it clash to treat Beings according to their natures? And if nothing can be brought against these with any degree of strength, as I think the united force of the scorers may here be defied, then there is a great probability this is the case in fact, "That God is
 " observant of our behaviour attentive to
 " our cries, the disposer of our lot at present,
 " and that his eyes are open upon the ways
 " of men to give every one hereafter according to his ways, and according to
 " the fruit of his doings."

As to our own future existence, and a state of future rewards and punishments,
 there

there is sufficient evidence to prove the strong probability of both. If we carry about us any thing besides, distinct from, and superior in its nature to, the body, let any scorner tell us what necessity there is *that* should perish with the body, or why we may not believe it the design of the great former, that it should exist separately: and since every *other* passion hath its object, and we find it was not given us in vain or merely to torment us, let any of them, if they can, tell us, why the strong affection to *immortality*, as natural to us as the meanest passion is, should not have its proper object provided for it.

These hints are sufficient I think to establish *the probability* of these truths, whilst more is ready to be offered to that end if it were needful; or if it were the design of this discourse to enlarge upon them. What is said is sufficient to answer my intention, if it be sufficient to prove that it is ignorance or prejudice not to allow them a good degree of probability. And if they are probable, it will eternally fix the brand of unreasonableness upon the scorner, since his folly and guilt must bear a proportion there-

to, and the hazard of a dreadful consequence must encrease therewith.

4. Nothing short of *absolute* certainty and demonstration that these doctrines cannot be true, can justify such a behaviour, or exempt it from the charge of singular folly and madness. May-bees and meer possibilities of their falsehood, if there were any just ground for them, are not sufficient for a creature that is reasonable and naturally capable of immortality to proceed upon, in order to justify himself before God, if there be one, nor to himself neither. And the reason is this, Their consequences are beyond all others awful and concerning to himself, if they should prove realities. It is distraction in any to deride those principles, till it is absurd to put that question, "What if they should be true?" and there will always be a just foundation for such a question, till those principles can be *demonstrated* false and without foundation.

But can any one who understands the nature of the propositions, "That there is *no* God, That there is *no* future state of existence after this," ever attempt such a thing? I am sure the bare pretending to it is

is a demonstration they neither understand the terms, nor what they are going about. The most that can be said, the furthest they can carry their sophistry is "That it may be so." But as I said before, this will not do by any means. For, if there be only a may-be, a bare possibility *on their side*, there is necessarily a possibility *against* them; and then to scorn and deride them as if it were *impossible* they should be true, really wants a name. I repeat it again; nothing but *demonstration* of the falsehood of their principles can render mockery and scorn *tolerable*. Till then, that is, for ever, the questions may still be put without any hope of answer, "What if there should be a God? What if the soul should survive the body? What if there should be a future state of rewards and punishments?" If there be any reply, it can never be such as to affect the questions, but only to make the scorers joints to tremble, and his heart to die within him. For, I cannot conceive any other than something of this tenor, "Then, he falls under the peculiar displeasure of that Being, as certainly as he exists; from a behaviour the most insolent, and

“ and an impiety of the deepest die. Then,
 “ he is certainly and everlastingly undone,
 “ as he hath made no provision for his own
 “ future happiness, and hath ridiculed, in
 “ spite of conscience and considerable evi-
 “ dence, an overwhelming woe. Then, he
 “ must appear before that Being who hath
 “ been the object of his contempt and scorn,
 “ I need not say with what astonishment,
 “ from the unexpectedness of the thing, and
 “ the then apparent distraction of his con-
 “ duct.”

And unless these scoffers are able to prove
 the principles of religion *absolute impossibilities*,
 they must know, if they will think, that these
 direful consequences may follow their beha-
 viour, these issues may take place. But who
 in their senses would scorn, till they were *in-*
fallibly certain, “ that there was no God to
 “ resent their derision, that there was no
 “ possible hazard if they should be in the
 “ wrong, or that things are demonstrably
 “ what they wish them to be?” And who,
 that hath any knowledge of what they speak
 and affirm, would ever pretend to any thing
 of demonstration or assurance here? In such
 an undertaking, I believe they would be
 scorn-

(III)

scorned for fools by all the sensible part of their own tribe, and might without the least arrogance or insolence be esteemed by all, *stupid to infatuation.*

5. The principles these scorers oppose to those of religion, and the end they propose by scorning religion, are exceedingly injurious and detrimental. No one can engage deliberately in actions without some motive and view: the scoffers doubtless have theirs: nay, they declare it. Now what are they? Why, as the great patrons of liberty and truth, they would free mankind from the ties and bondage of religious principles; they would deliver them from those horrors that the belief of a God, a providence, and a future state of retribution subject them to. But, whatever they may style themselves, they are justly esteemed *enemies to mankind*: for hereby they would rob them of their best supports, their most cheering prospects, and of what every one naturally wishes might be true. Would they help them off with their *fears*? Ay, but they strip them of their *hopes* too. Would they rescue them from *one* kind of fear? Probably they may, but they subject them to *many others*, each of which is of

a *tormenting* kind. Hereby instead of freedom and happiness, they introduce nothing but disconsolacy, desperation, and gloom.

What friends they are to mankind will be further seen, by considering the benefits they *propose* to themselves from scorning and trampling upon religious principles. And they are evidently these and nothing better :

“ That they may follow their inclinations,
“ and indulge their appetites as they please :

“ That they may embrace every proposal

“ that they like without scruple or hesi-

“ tation : that they may get rid of their

“ reason, and get the better of their con-

“ sciences : suppress thought, and fence

“ against reflection, whereby they may enjoy

“ the freedom of acting without the inter-

“ ruption of those shackles, or paying any

“ slavish regard to decency, justice, wisdom

“ and truth.” I allow from hence, when

they have thus attained to the scoffer's chair,

they may take greater scope and liberty than

others. But are not these glorious advanta-

ges for a person to labour for? And *labour*

it must be, where natural reason and con-

science have ever had any strength, before

they can attain to them. What do all these

amount

amount to more than this? “ That they can
 “ make more free with their Maker; are
 “ more at liberty for vice, or are more
 “ ready for any propofal of that kind; can
 “ be greater flaves to their paffions; can
 “ multiply diffreffes in this world, and, if
 “ there be another, can deftroy their fouls;
 “ and this more *eafily* and *speedily* than
 “ fome others can.” I have not knowing-
 ly aggravated or misrepresented the matter
 in the leaft, nor attempted to excite one
 idea in the reader’s mind, but what the na-
 ture of the thing carries in it. Sober con-
 fideration, methinks, would lead every one
 to pronounce, there is no temptation in all
 this, if propofed, to lead to that height of im-
 piety, which deriding and scoffing at religi-
 on is: but if there be any *temptation*, I am
 fure there can be no *recompence*. Who
 would become a scorner when thefe are all
 his gains? When ’tis only from the lofs of rea-
 son and thought, that they themfelves can
 think them advantages at any time, and when
 they oftentimes muft *feel* them the moft un-
 happy circumftances of their lives?

Thus have I endeavoured to fet to view this
 character and practice of scorning at religi-

on ; from whence I think we may justly collect there is a peculiar absurdity, guilt, and danger accompanying it.

S E C T. III.

BEFORE I proceed any further I would make this earnest request, That what hath been already offered may be considered and improved, for the fortifying our minds against infection from these sort of persons. They are not so few, nor so shy in the discovering their humour, as to render an antidote needless to any. The danger doth not arise from the arguments that they have to produce, nor from their addresses to the reason of others, but from their *numbers*, which with too many, gives this scorning temper the influence of a *fashion* ; and also from the plausible style they give to this their humour, I mean, that of wit, sense, or a free way of thinking ; but neither of these can belong to it wherein they are real excellencies, or merit the esteem and emulation of mankind. However, from hence the infection is too often conveyed, and the poyson taken down. To these may I not subjoin their direct attacks

tacks on the natural passion of shame by jests and raillery, which many, especially of the younger sort, cannot stand? These are indeed mean arts and pitiful triumphs, since the means is deception, and they are beholden to the weaknesses and vitious inclinations of mankind for success: and, without any hesitation, we may pronounce all their pretensions to promote liberty and truth downright impositions upon the credulity of mankind, since their aim is manifestly *meer victory*, and since the worst of slavery, the most uncomfortable and dangerous errors, are introduced by their success.

That such may never carry us over to their tents, let us consider this scoffing humour as to the principles and practice of religion, or as to a fear of sin, a regard to God, and an eternity before us, in the light wherein it hath been set. And sure I am, none amongst themselves, who are fit to be reasoned with, can deny, “ That the principles they deride, if they should prove
 “ true, are of *more* importance to us than
 “ any besides. They cannot deny a *possibility* of their truth; nay that there is a considerable *probability*; insomuch, that a

“ multitude of facts which their senses and
 “ experience attest, can never be accounted
 “ for without admitting the truth of those
 “ principles: further, it is impossible from
 “ the nature of the thing to prove them
 “ false, or to be assured in a rational way
 “ they cannot be true; nay, granting them
 “ what they would have, that they *should*
 “ prove fancies and fictions in the end, yet
 “ their scorning them at present ministers
 “ no advantage to encourage a reasonable
 “ creature to join them, since the sum of
 “ their privileges is, only to be *more vicious*,
 “ or more easily so, than others; which,
 “ were there no God to punish hereafter,
 “ is in fact only to be *more miserable* than
 “ others at present.” Thus I think the
 case truly stands. I hope every reader who
 hath embraced the principles of religion, and
 hath engaged in the practice of it, will, from
 what hath been offered, find himself much
 less liable to be damped in his fervor, or un-
 hinged in his course by any thing that
 scorners can throw out; since, after all their
 efforts to rob him of what is at the very
 foundation of his present peace, as a God, a
 providence, and a future state of existence,
 they

they cannot rob him of the *possibility* of them ; and since *this lowest* of all those circumstances which guide or determine the human mind, is sufficient to justify him in his *supream* regards thereto. For, tho' meer *possibility* respecting the truth of a thing, when single and alone, is not of much moment or force ; yet where a thing is *undoubtedly possible*, and at the same time from its very nature and consequences is of *the utmost importance* if it should prove a truth, the case is greatly altered ; and amongst the thinking part of mankind it will be accounted a sufficient reason to rescue it from common scorn and contempt : how much more, which is the case before us, when *great probability* is on its side, continually growing upon enquiry, and *none* lying against it.

C H A P. V.

S E C T. I.

SCORNING at religion is the character and practice of many from downright stupidity, and disuse of their faculties ; from an education in vice and the most servile

vile employment of their understandings : they have scarcely senses left them by their vices to exercise, or to enable them to discern betwixt good and evil. But this flows so naturally from another cause, that I think I should be justified if, without any further enquiry, I should resolve it into that as the general cause and reason ; I mean, “ A resolution to follow their own inclinations “ and humours, and to admit of no restraints “ in the prosecution of their pleasures.” Supposing such a resolution as this, which the general behaviour of such persons proclaims, it is easy, and impartial reason would say it was just, to resolve their scoffs and derisions into this, if not as the only, yet as the principal cause. It is certain, the better any person is, the more delightful it is to him that there is a God, the stronger is his desire for immortality, and the greater his satisfaction in it : and as his goodness improves, this satisfaction encreases. From hence there is great ground to believe, that it is a consciousness of vice, and a resolution to follow it, which renders the truths of religion at any time painful, and is at the bottom of this malignant scorning. When persons are resolved

solved upon a full and unlimited indulgence, it naturally raises their spleen against every thing that would abridge or reproach them : this the principles of religion must do : they immediately therefore turn enemies to them. And since they dare not descend to the merits of the cause, or to the goodness of the foundation, they have no other weapons to fight with against it, but scorn and derision. I would appeal to the *observation* of every one, whether such a dissoluteness of principles is not generally attended with a dissoluteness of manners : and may I not also appeal to the *reason* of every one, whether a resolution for an unrestrained gratification of the passions doth not naturally lead to an abhorrence of religious principles, which stand in the way of their design, and prophesy nothing but evil to them? When persons offer *known* affronts to Heaven, it concerns them to extirpate all apprehensions of a God to punish them. “ The fool hath said in his heart, “ No God * :” none for me ! let there be none ! it is the language of inclination and desire, not of his understanding and judgment. When persons live in the violation of
natural

* Psal. xiv. 1 :

natural conscience, it becomes their interest to keep out or banish all apprehensions of immortality and judgment: they cannot but be enemies to what is so destructive of their important wishes.

I am fully satisfied this is the grand reason and secret of the former's practice: they would run down those things which they dislike, and because they dislike them; they would fain bring them into disgrace with themselves, because they check them in their pursuits, and because they cannot think of them, but in pain. But, as some of them may think this mean and base, at least may in words disclaim it, so I would proceed to the

S E C T. II.

THIRD thing I proposed, to consider the occasions which they may stile the *reasons* of their practice. There are some will tell us, their deriding both the principles and practice of religion proceeds from *just* causes. In justice to my subject, out of a regard to truth on which side soever it lies, and for the satisfaction of the reader, I shall follow them in their pleas. And as far as I have
been

been able to collect from conversation, observation, and hints which some of this sort have dropt in print, the following things have had the greatest stress laid on them, and have given the greatest handle to this scorning humour.

It hath been sometimes urged, “ That
 “ there have been a great many cheats and
 “ impostures in the world, and great use
 “ hath been made of religion in every age
 “ to delude and make a prey of mankind,
 “ and therefore it merits contempt and
 “ scorn, therefore such a treatment of it is
 “ justifiable.”

Strange conclusion this! as to which I would appeal to the common understandings of men. Is there any connection or consequence in this? “ Many have made
 “ use of religion for the carrying on vile
 “ and base designs, therefore there is no
 “ truth in its principles, no foundation for
 “ its practice.” Surely the reality and truth of those principles is absolutely fixed and necessary, antecedent to all the uses that men may put them to, and entirely independent therefore of all their abuses! The ends and uses they may employ them to subserve
 can

can never affect their reality, or, if they were true before, render them a jot less so afterwards: how then can religion itself merit their contempt, or how can their scorning that be justified? Further, can any thing of the most acknowledged truth and goodness escape abuses, or the being employed for some base design? Do not ill-minded persons make use of the best things they can to accomplish their ends! But is this ever allowed to alter the *nature* of those things? If there was no foundation for religious principles, if they were not approved universally by reasonable minds, how should designs be so successfully carried on *by their help*? If they were so *notoriously* groundless as the scorner would have himself and others believe, they could never be made such engines of as he pretends they are; mankind could not be so easily betrayed by them as he would represent. This itself therefore is a better argument for *religion*, than *any* that he hath for his *scorning*. But, if this *abusive* application of religion affects the principles, or saps the foundation of it, I know not what can stand: if, because men have made use of the principle of a divine existence, of a pro-

providence, and a state of future rewards and punishments, to subserve their own mean or vile ends on mankind, it justly follows that there is no truth in the things themselves; or that they from thence merit the treatment of impostures; the scorner, whether he will or no, must allow this further general consequence, “ that every thing “ which is abused and misapplied really “ wants truth and foundation:” and then I know not what can escape, or what will be left us. Honour, fidelity, justice, friendship, and reason itself must go, as being nothing in reality but engines of deceit; for all these have been abused and perverted to mean and base ends. And why don’t these scornerers exercise their talent upon *every thing alike*, when there is equal ground? Why don’t they rally in their coarse way *all pretensions* of sincerity and honesty, and, with their usual decency, declare these to be no other than artifices whereby every one endeavours to put a cheat upon his neighbour? for in truth they have been applied to that end. It looks like *dishonesty*, and is very unlike *free-thinking*, to single *religion* out for drollery and raillery because it hath been a-

M

bused,

bused, when every thing else that is excellent, and that *they allow* to have a reality and foundation, hath suffered the same way, even every principle that they can set up instead of religion.

Another occasion of this scorning is, “ An
 “ affectation of deeper thought and freer enquiry than others : these persons set up
 “ for greater wisdom and penetration than
 “ others. They would be thought, from
 “ their renouncing commonly received
 “ principles, to see further than other people, and to have detected the fallacy of
 “ some things that hath lain hid from all
 “ excepting a very few : agreeably to this,
 “ they represent those who believe and act
 “ upon the principles of religion as a parcel
 “ of poor credulous people, who believe any
 “ thing that is told them, and their principles as the meer effects of education, arbitrarily instilled at first, and unreasonably
 “ or traditionally held to the last.”

That this is *pure affectation* is very evident, because this conceit of themselves is founded upon their thinking differently from others. But will any one calmly say, that *meerly* to differ from the rest of the world is an argument of a better understanding, or that truth
 and

and falsehood is to be judged of by meer novelty or antiquity? this is new standard indeed! Scorning itself can never prove free enquiry or deep penetration, but may prove the contrary to both, and when exercised upon religious principles doth do so; for I will venture to affirm, if it be any venture at all, that it never yet was the effect of *enquiry* or *free thought*. Could the embracing of religious principles be resolved entirely into an implicit faith, the rejecting them might argue deeper thought and enquiry: but when by the laws of our religion we are not only permitted but *enjoined to search and try, to prove and examine* what we more implicitly received in our education, and to ground all our faith upon evidence, it is ignorance or arrogance, and not greater wisdom or penetration, to scoff at those principles, which multitudes, of at least equal abilities, more close and impartial enquirers, and as honest as they can be for their lives, have believed and founded all their hopes upon.

As for *credulity* or easiness of belief, which this scorning humour imputes to those who embrace these principles, it is astonishing with what face they can impute it to others

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meerly for that reason; as if there was *no* evidence attending them, as if there were *no* reasons to support such a faith and practice, or as if it was upon that account these scorner rejected them. Whereas in truth, *no faith* can be more implicate than *their infidelity* is: none in the world can swallow without chewing beyond themselves; or more fervilely follow a cry, in the disuse of their reason, and the abjuring of free enquiry. If they have any creed at all, it must be made up of such absurdities and contradictions, that *they* must be the most remarkable of all people living for credulity, or for believing both without and against reason. It is therefore an insolence that might justify a degree of indignation, for men to charge others with believing *any* thing, only because they believe the best attested truths in the world, or *meerly* because they believe things which the scorner doth not. It would be well if such would consider, that their measure of conceit, and their *undistinguishing* suspicion of every body and every thing in *matters of religion*, is full as likely to abuse and mislead them as the most easy credulity can do: and that their

treat-

treating those points with contempt and scorn, which both instinct and reason, not to mention revelation, concur in attesting, is a mark of fond conceit and ridiculous affectation, yea of any thing *but* a superior understanding or penetration. Were they but as much afraid of imposing upon their *own* understandings, as they gravely pretend they are of having them imposed upon *by others*; or of *not* believing things most obvious, important, and which have the strongest evidence, as they pretend they are of believing upon *little* or *no* evidence, their contempt and ridicule of religious principles would soon be exchanged for reverence, and they would scorn themselves as much as they have derided others.

Another occasion of this scorning temper is the behaviour and practice of many who profess religion. “ How many are there, faith-
 “ the scoffer, who publickly and warmly a-
 “ vow the principles, but in life and conduct
 “ discard them? if they are not professed by
 “ others, they sound the alarm of Heretick
 “ and Infidel against them, whilst that cir-
 “ cumpection, holiness, and usefulness in
 “ life, which these avowed principles de-
 “ mand, is entirely disregarded by the zea-

“ lots themselves : and they do no more,
 “ they live no better, sometimes much worse,
 “ than those who in words disclaim those
 “ principles.” This hath often opened the
 mouth of the scorner, and been produced
 as a warrant for their scorning at religion it-
 self as a jest and artifice. For say they,
 “ what truth can we suppose there is in
 “ these things, when those whose province
 “ it is to search into their foundations, as
 “ particularly the Clergy, and others who
 “ make a great noise about them in conver-
 “ sation, give such glaring practical evidence
 “ they don’t believe themselves ?”

I acknowledge this is an unhappy case, and
 as to the general fact I wish it were not so
 often verified. I pretend not to excuse such
 be they of what order or class soever ; but
 I must in justice demand of those who are
 addicted to scorning, that the overflowings
 of their humour be confined to the persons
 who are thus subjecting and exposing them-
 selves, and that they blend not the innocent
 with the guilty, nor transfer their scorn from
 their practice to their principles. For, the
 question in which the scoffer is concerned is,
 not, “ whether some do profess the prin-
 ciples

“ ciples of religion who do not really be-
 “ lieve or regard them ;” but this, “ Whe-
 “ ther the principles themselves have not
 “ the most sufficient satisfactory evidence at-
 “ tending them agreeing to their nature,
 “ and whether the inconsistencies of others
 “ will bear him out in this contemptuous re-
 “ jection, if at last he should find there is
 “ a God that judgeth.” These persons will
 not allow that religion hath *ever the more*
 foundation, because many do *really believe* its
 principles and adhere to its practice ; why
 then should they make it an evidence of its
wanting foundation, that any of its professed
 adherents do *not act* in conformity to it ?
 If the faith and practice of the one doth not
 affect the nature of the things, neither can
 the disbelief and inconsistency of the other.
 No ; the scorner hath full liberty of exa-
 mining the principles themselves : he is un-
 der no restraint but his own inclination from
 enquiring, on what foot the divine existence,
 the soul’s immortality, and a future state of
 recompence, stand. To these enquiries let
 him go : that is the way to be satisfied if he
desires to know how matters really are. The
behaviour of persons is never allowed to be a
 rule

rule of judging the *truth of principles* by: it may be an evidence of their own personal belief or disbelief of them, but never can evidence what foundation the principles themselves have. To take occasion then to scorn and despise religious principles, from the unsuitable behaviour of those who profess them, only betrays a strong disposition in such to scorn; it only proves their aversion to them, and shews what they would *wish* them to be, groundless fictions; but it can never justify their derision, nor in the least impair the strength of religion's foundations.

These are some of the chief occasions of this humour, in which I hope the reader sees that there is nothing to justify it, or to rescue it from the charge of unreasonableness, crime, and madness.

S E C T. III.

THE scornful are evidently of two sorts. Some this way attack the *very principles* of religion themselves, and it may be, through their debaucheries, or the long application of scorn and ridicule, may have brought themselves to disbelieve them, and
really

really to laugh at them as fables and impostures. In pure pity and compassion to such, not knowing but this may fall into the hands of some whose consciences may say, "thou art the man," I would address myself to them, beseeching them by all that is dear to them, by all that is serious and valuable; as they love themselves, or, if there be a God, as they hope to share his love, that they would consider the folly that their practice betrays, and the risque they run in the consequences, whatever their over-weaning opinion of their understandings, or their sensual inclinations may lead them to believe.

I would appeal to and ask such, if they have the reason of men, whether if the principles of religion *are true*, they are not from their very nature of *more importance* than any thing besides themselves? If there is such a Being as the Lord our God is described to be, of such power, purity, and justice; so intimately present with us, so particularly observant of us, who will finally and for ever adjudge our state from his perfect knowledge of our hearts and ways.—If as to our better part, our souls, we are designedly immortal, and are now upon our trial for an hap-

happiness inconceivably great, or liable to an equal punishment.—Who with any understanding but must acknowledge, that these are infinitely more concerning to us than any thing that can enter into our hearts besides? Methinks then however *doubtful* they were, if at the same time they were *barely possible*, they ought to be considered, and seriously spoken of. There cannot be any room for jest and drollery. No one in his wits can think, that a Being of infinite power, all-knowing and just, or that eternal happiness and misery, are subjects of derision and scorn, unless they were palpable absurdities and contradictions. But where is the hardy creature that will attempt the proof of this? And if they are not downright absurdities and contradictions, their very nature saith there *may* be truth in them: but before the scorner's behaviour can be vindicated by reason “he must be absolutely certain they “ cannot be so.” And will you put the hazard of your eternal state upon the foot of your ability of *demonstrating* that there is no God, no state of existence after this? Whoever hath arrived to this pitch of stupidity is past reasoning with. But I appeal

to the consciences of such, whether their scoffs, their ridicule, and contempt, ever arose from any *evidence* of the falshood of these principles, or whether they did not entirely result from a *bare wish* that there might be nothing in them? Are not their guilt and their fears the springs of their scorning? Is not the reason of their endeavouring to run down the belief of a God and a future state of recompences, “because they
 “can extract nothing but terrors from
 “thence?” But, what is all this more than merely to wish they may not be true? Fond man! consider the vanity of thy wishes! It may be for thy interest to wish there was no God, no state after this: but so much the more dreadful thy circumstances that thou hast made it *necessary*, “when thou hast
 “nothing but a wish for it.” This only faith what thou *wouldst have* to be true, but doth not carry the least evidence, or yield the least ground to believe, it is so. If thy wishes or thy scoffing either would *make* things true or false, it were to thy purpose; but can either of them work in that manner? Canst thou think of altering things by thy imagination or inclination? Try the experi-

periment first in lower matters, either in respect of thy health or thy substance, and see what wishes and imagination can do there.

Well then ; if all thou hast for there being *no* God, *no* future state, is only a *wish*, I must tell thee there is as much *demonstration* on the other side as the case will admit ; which is always accounted as much as a wise and reasonable person should require. If the question, “ what if these things should “ be true,” when seriously put to thyself, is enough to shudder thee, and more than thou canst ever answer, what will the certainty and the conviction do with thee hereafter, if that be thy *experience* ? Vain imagination ! to think that thou canst carry thy scoffs even *to* the grave, if thou lovest not the exercise of thought before ! It is very great odds, but thy senseless chance, fate, and fortune, to which thou ascribest every event, shall be exchanged for the powerful apprehension of an existing God ; that the fond conceit of insensibility at death will vanish at the approach of a terrible hereafter, THE SOMETHING beyond the grave. If thou couldst scoff under one apprehension, I am sure thou

thou wilt dreadfully recoil and shrink under the other.

But what is thy surprize likely to be, when those realities, those comparatively *only* realities, of an Almighty God and an unchangeable eternity, which in thy fond conceit thou hast treated as dreams and phantoms, shall appear in their direful *demonstration* ! When it shall be all *sight* and *experience* ! When thou shalt “ feel there is a God “ in the terrors of his justice,” and be convinced by what thou sustaineft “ that the “ presages of eternity in thy own frame “ were true ! ” What will the sensation of thy own mind be from its reflections upon its past derision and scorn ? How absolutely wilt thou become the object of thy *own* detestation and scorn, which is much harder to bear than all that the world can pour out upon thee ? If the truths of a divine existence and a future state are *possible*, it is *possible* for this to be thy case; which one would think no reasonable creature could bear the apprehension of : and that they are possible, he is not a man that denies. If they prove a *certainty*, they fix the *certainty* of this thy condition; a condition no human tongue can represent.

I would appeal once more ; is it not wisdom in matters of infinite consequence if they should prove true, supposing them to be doubtful, to chuse the safest side ? And what is the safest side in respect of these truths, “ but to regard them as if they were certain ? ” For, if they prove delusions, thou canst not upon the whole be ordinarily a sufferer in this state, nor canst thou suffer for thine error hereafter : *that* thine error will perish with thee. If there be no God, there will be none to call thee to an account for thy mistake : if there be no future state, thou wilt fare as well as thy fellow mortals. But, if they prove realities, as they are indisputably possibilities, if thou hast *regarded* them, thou art eternally happy. — It is then at least a wise and rational belief : put it at the lowest it is a noble adventure : and if it is so, what is the practice of the scorner for folly and danger !

What hath been offered I hope contains sufficient reasons for such to make a stand, to reflect upon their behaviour, and to bring it to the test of reason and conscience. Their past indecent and wicked behaviour is now retrievable ; and it is distraction to continue their scornings till death convinces them.

For,

For, it is the evidence that attends these truths, productive of their *belief* of them at present, which will finally stand them in stead; the evidence of *sight* and *experience* comes too late. In compassion therefore to such I would earnestly intreat them, if they are really dissatisfied about the principles of religion, with the greatest impartiality and diligence to enquire into their evidence. For a time suspend your scoffs and lay aside your levity. You can retire and use much discipline for the cure of a chronical distemper, nor do you think it long or hard if you are any way successful at last. Surely the call to retirement and thought under the present circumstances of your minds, is at least equally loud, and the end equally reasonable! Do not scoff away your souls. Every thing reproaches such a levity; and I am sure, man hath the highest reason to be serious who hath such possibilities, yea such awful certainties, before him to attend to, as an almighty God and an eternal state of happiness or misery. If the event amount not to a serious reflection upon their conduct, it forebodes a dreadful resolution of trying the issue, which I

sadly fear they will find the same with “ a
“ resolution to be everlastingly miserable.”

But there is another sort of scoffers ; who profess some regard to the principles of religion, and after a sort believe them, whilst yet they scorn and ridicule a *behaviour* in others that answers to such principles. They would account it a reproach and reflection to be suspected of denying them, and yet deride *those who act* in a conformity to them. Surely such a conduct as this testifies they never seriously reflect upon the matter, nor weigh their own behaviour ! If they did, they could not but see the shocking inconsistency of it, and that the reproach they endeavoured to fasten upon others returns with double force upon themselves. For,

“ They scoff at the religious for believing
“ in reality what they themselves allow to be
“ true.” But what shadow of reason is there
in this for derision ; To say that religious
principles are true, is to say “ they are be-
“ lieved by themselves, and ought to be
“ believed by others :” the more firm and
heartly then the assent of the mind is to them,
the more is their truth and importance answered. If the scorers themselves think
that,

that there is evidence sufficient to make them articles of their *professed* belief, it must be still more rational and commendable to be-rooted and established in the belief of them, or which is the same thing, *really* to believe what they *professedly* assent to. If they allow them to be true, they acknowledge they have a claim to the assent of the mind; the more thoroughly therefore the mind doth assent thereto, the greater suitableness is there in the act to the objects. So that these scorners reproach the religious for passing, what they themselves esteem, a right judgment; for doing that in reality which they themselves say ought to be done in shew and words, and for treating those things as truths which are confessed truths with themselves.

But the unreasonableness of these scoffers behaviour appears still more monstrous, when it is considered “ that they deride the religious for acting according to the scorners “ own principles.” Every one that can distinguish must allow the principles of religion to be of such concern and moment, that, if really believed, they must naturally influence the practice. What is thus *natural* to a reasonable creature, as reasonable, can ne-

ver be ridiculous in such a one: much less have they, who in general allow their truth, any *reason* for deriding others for acting agreeably to them; nay, of all the unreasonables this is one of the greatest in the world. For, this sort of scorers admit there is a God, and yet mock at those who by their homage acknowledge it, or manifest any sense of him: they allow that he is almighty, wise, holy, and good, and yet laugh at those who express any fear, hope, and trust in him: they say when they are appealed to, that his favour or displeasure must make an inconceivable difference in our state, and yet ridicule those who seek the one and endeavour to avoid the other: they will acknowledge the soul of man is immortal, and that an happiness or misery suited to that immortality must be the portion of all hereafter, and yet they jest at all concern of mind that the religious express, in the securing a glorious and honourable immortality: they will confess there can be no felicity here but in the peace of our consciences, nor none hereafter but in the approbation of God, and, yet scorn those who scruple the losing of their peace, and are ambitious of keeping themselves

selves in the divine love : In short, they will allow that this uncertain state is designedly a trial for eternity, from whence it must consequently derive its value, and yet they laugh at those who are governing their conduct by it, who prefer their souls to their bodies, eternity to time, or are making a due preparation for it. Their behaviour would not be more extravagant and wild, should they deride others for following any of the principles of self-love and self-preservation ; in preferring ease, wealth, pleasure, and happiness before pain, want and misery ; or for scrupling to run into the fire, or to throw themselves down a precipice with their eyes open. It is hard indeed that we should be obliged to ask pardon for acting reasonably ; that it should be necessary to make an apology for being awake and in our right senses ; or that having sense enough to foresee a future advantage and a distant danger, both of them the greatest imaginable, we should incur censure and reproach from those who *pride* themselves in their sense, if we discover so much discretion as to secure the happiness, and avoid the danger. Certainly, if it is barbarous not to profess the principles

ples of religion, it can never be ridiculous to follow them, or to be governed by them! If it is matter of disgrace not to own and avow them, it can never be matter of common scorn to behave with that circumspection, seriousness, and strictness which those avowed principles demand! On the contrary, we cannot more expose ourselves to *just* derision, than by counter-acting our own professed belief of matters so important, allowing and disregarding them at the same time. I hope therefore none who thus see how the case really stands, will ever be moved from their steadfastness by any such attempt. Place the ridicule where it ought to lie; it belongs to those who in the most obvious case see not what is ridiculous, nor that they are exposing themselves to just derision in deriding others for governing themselves by reason, for acting consistently, and practically regarding those principles which the scoffer himself professes. Nothing can be more absurd and stupid than scorn and laughter thus placed; except it be, “ the admitting their influence, either by deserting
 “ the practice of religion, or meanly con-
 “ cealing

“ cealing our regards to it, upon their account.”

S E C T. IV.

I SHALL close with some advices to those, who are at present advocates and friends to religion, and who desire to continue so. They are designed as preservatives against the influence of this unreasonable and wicked practice, amidst our unavoidable converse at sometimes with these scorers, and the danger we are thence in of infection from them.

1. Let us never converse with such but as pure necessity leads us. Relation or business may render some concern with them unavoidable: but I think the maintaining a civility towards such, and the dispatching of our business with them, ought to limit our converse. Where persons are of this scorning humour, we cannot be long with them, at least not in a free hour, but we must be witnesses of their talent; from whence *no advantages* can possibly arise: such conversation cannot enlighten or improve the mind; but on the contrary, it must vex the soul that is truly righteous, it may greatly unhinge those who cannot bear
a jest,

a jest, or have not capacity to distinguish between what *is* derided and what *deserves* it, who were bidding very fair for religion and heaven before: it may corrupt their minds and greatly diminish the veneration and regard they had for sacred things. And considering what such scoffing is levelled at, I think our duty to God, to ourselves, and to the common interest of mankind, demand an *express* resentment, by leaving such company. They scorn, no doubt, not only to keep themselves in countenance, or to display the silly thing they stile *wit*, but to bring others over to their tents. Being determined never to be *reasoned into* seriousness, they have the confidence to try whether others cannot be *laughed out* of it. An attempt this is that the very dignity of human nature requires should be received with indignation: not to their hurt or suffering any way, but in order to our own security. For what pretence of advantage have they to make to us; They would laugh us out of all our solid support and comfort both in life and at death: they would ridicule us out of a belief of a Being that is our preserver, benefactor, guide, and therein the object of our

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our hope and trust beyond what all the world can be : who is perfectly able, and may be regularly relied upon to conduct us through all the changes and hazards of our pilgrimage, and to introduce us to a state of perfect happiness hereafter : nay they would banter us out of every great and generous thought, every noble aim and expectation—and when we have surrendered these, what are we to have ?—Nothing that I can find, but the pleasure of scorning with them at things wherein our highest interest lies, things of the last consequence to us, things that can never be disproved : so that the blessedness amounts but to this, “ we shall have
 “ the pleasure of being fools, mad, and
 “ miserable for company.”

Besides ; there is this reason for a very sparing converse with such scorers ; as their practice can never *instruct* or *improve* us, so their disposition scarcely admits of a *conviction* or *instruction* from us. Whilst this temper and humour prevails, no argument or reason is likely to influence : for as soon as any thing like them appears, they are at once suppressed under the brand of *preaching* ; they are immediately condemned under the
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term of *seriousness* ; with both which the scorner is at open defiance. Now, who would associate with those, who will neither receive any benefit, nor can communicate any ? Whilst at the same time all that distinguishes us as men, and all that we justly triumph in as christians, is hazarded thereby.

2. Let us be upon our guard, that we are not deluded by appearances and pretensions. This scoffing humour, as it often proceeds from an affectation of wit, so it too much influences others from an apprehension of its being so ; especially the younger sort. To be *witty*, stands with many for *every* thing ; and they are ready to sacrifice any thing for the gaining of such a character. It is very strange, that, amongst persons who can think it should ever pass for an accomplishment to turn *every* thing into jest or ridicule ; or that the attempting it should ingratiate any person ! This looks as if wit was made up of a command of words and a shameless face, or an ability of saying any thing of any thing, without regard to truth, decency, or good manners : if this is an excellency I know not what is a deformity. Whatever talents a man possesses, if they are im-

employed to destroy the eternal distinction of things, to throw down what it is the highest interest of mankind to believe and maintain the reputation of ; let it have what plausible name it will, it is really the highest insolence and injury, and merits nothing but contempt and detestation. I hope none will ever surrender their religion to any phantom of wit or humour, or in the least suspect the principles thereof, because a parcel of dull wretches, who cannot render themselves of any consideration by any other means, shall set up for *wits*, upon this sole foundation and qualification, that they have front enough to treat the most sacred things with the coarsest freedom ; and have raked together a few insipid thread-bare jests, which upon all occasions they throw out upon what hath the face of religion. This can never affect either their truth or importance. It is a very easy matter for the lowest sized understanding to throw out what may excite a laugh ; and a very common thing for a laugh to go round, at what if you abstract the impudence or prophaneness of the thing, hath nothing in it. But what hath truth and falsehood to do with such

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things,

things, or how can we distinguish one from the other by such means? Such an undistinguishing mind, with all its bold says, can never make religion, but only itself, ridiculous, with all thinking persons.

3. Let us diligently beware of inconsistencies: and this both for the sake of others and ourselves. Let us do this for the sake of *others*: in order to cut off a considerable occasion of scoffing at religion from those who seek occasion, and who make no greater improvement of any thing to this end, than the inconsistencies of those who profess it. Do we believe there is a God? Let us act as under his eye, and with a governing view to his approbation. Do we believe we are designed for another state, and that the issue of the present life will be reward or punishment unspeakable? Let our conduct shew that we live by faith and not by sense. Do we believe a solemn day of retribution, when rewards or punishments shall be fully adjudged to every one according to their deeds? let us see to it that we are in all things governed by the gospel of Christ, which we believe to be the rule of the expected judgment. This would prevent
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much scorning, and thereby render our temptation less from that quarter; nay it would be religion's great credit and defence. — But let us beware of inconsistencies, from the influence and tendency they have to the reconciling us to the chair of the scorner. If we *indulge* ourselves in acting contrary to our belief in any instance, or as if we did not believe religious principles, we are in great danger of joining the scorers, at least as to that particular article to which our practice runs counter. For instance; Do we believe at present that we are designed for another state? but if we allow ourselves in what renders the thought very painful, who can tell how long this may be the matter of our faith? The uneasiness of mind which our conduct occasions by means of that article, will render it very soon our *wish* that there was no such state: and when it thus appears necessary for our peace that there should be none, shall we not easily admit disputes about it, whether it is so certain as we thought, and whether much may not be offered against it? In this case shall we not be very willing to *embrace* objections against it, and be *thankful* to those who can

supply us, and thereby help us off with it ? From hence, having much accustomed ourselves to converse with objections to the neglect of the evidences, we are greatly prepared to fling it up and join with others in their scorning. The more careful we are to act consistently with the articles of our faith, the faster shall we hold them, and the less influence will all temptations to doubt or scorn them have upon us. If we would but so live that a Divine existence, a future state, and a judgment-day were our *hope* and *consolation*, we should be able to sustain any attacks from the scorner, and soon discern that their treatment of religion proceeds not from any counter-evidence, but a dread and abhorrence of the truths they deride. In a word, whilst we live as those important truths require, our hopes of their final fulfilment will be a perpetual spring of pleasure, and thereupon every one will be esteemed our worst enemy that attempts to depreciate them, or to deprive us of them.

4. Let us guard against the prevalency of a drolling jesting humour. I am far from being an enemy to chearfulness, but on the contrary, under the regulation of reason
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would promote it all I could, as consistent with christianity, encouraged by it, and a recommendation of the strictest regards to it. Nevertheless, it is capable of degenerating into its neighbouring extream, levity : and when thus degenerated and accompanied with a readiness of thought, it may betray into an humour very detrimental to religion. It is the indulged practice of some, to be continually jesting and giving light turns to things : if this is not under a check, we shall find not only, as we often do, that friend and interest are both sacrificed thereto, but that it will lead us to spare nothing however sacred, and to level every thing that comes before us. When there is an habit of turning things into ridicule it takes a person off his guard, he loses the sense of the difference in things ; he is indisposed to attend to any thing serious *as serious* or weighty, and is thereby very easily led, not only to sack in, but to *chuse* the representations of things that jests and humour gives of them, and to make free with every thing that comes before him, the most solemn things not excepted. Tho' this doth not affect *the nature* of the things, yet it must af-

fect *his apprehension* of them, and the influence they have upon him : sacred things, it is allowed, are still sacred, and important truths are still important ; but I believe no one will say that they *appear* the one or the other to the mind that is dressing up everything in the air of a jest, or that they can be regarded according to their *nature*, but according to their *representation*. If we find a strong disposition therefore to this humour, and delight in it, it is of the greatest importance that we set a guard upon it : it is a sad leveller where it prevails, for it destroys the wheat with the chaff ; it naturally leads to that company where a man soon commences a scorner ; it reconciles the mind to the prophaneness of such persons, and cuts off all opportunity and capacity of better information and remedy.

5. Let us endeavour to grow in goodness, and to get an experimental acquaintance with the satisfaction and advantages of religion, both in principles and practice. A mind under the stated influence of christian principles ; a will, affections and conduct under the influence of christian precepts, would strongly fortify against the more beguiling

or forcible attacks of the scorner. A growth in grace the Apostle recommends as a preservative against all practical errors, against all the seducements of the wicked *. What! when we have *found* the sweets of religion, when we have *experienced* the many advantages flowing from the belief of its principles and the conduct of its rules.—Shall we ever surrender to a scoff, a bold jest, or an empty witticism! No; a person's experience is usually the last thing that he parts with: we are wont to say, there is no *argument* against it; it is very probable therefore that no derision, sneers, or laugh will prevail against it, which have no *shew of argument*. We do not know enough of religion to enable us to bear any thing for it, or to abide by it: hence it is, that it is so easily wrested from us, or that we so tamely surrender it. If we would but cultivate religion by the practice of it, we should find that it ministers the courage, and produces that love to itself, which are necessary for our adhering to it. When our reason and experience unite in their testimony for religion, all the attempts of the scorner will appear highly injurious

* 2 Pet. iii. 17, 18.

jurious as well as unreasonable; interest will conspire with our judgments to set us at the farthest remove, both from their chair and their company. Let us labour therefore to feel more of the power of that religion, which hath love, peace, and hope for its principles, and the perfection of every thing. felicitating for its scope and end. As our own inward holiness improves, the more shall we feel a resentment and abhorrence of the scorner's practice, as the highest affront offered to our reason, an insolent denial of our own experience, and an inhuman attempt upon our most valuable interest.

And now, if I should have been so happy as to convince any of the falshood of those principles by which vice is greatly promoted and frequently justified; and of the danger of that company and converse by which it is more effectually riveted than by most other means, I am perswaded the eye that is thus opened will naturally turn towards Heaven. Upon this apprehension I would offer the following form of address to God, for the assisting and directing, not to the stinting or confining, the workings of their own awakened minds,

minds, under the influences of the divine spirit.

O THOU FATHER OF LIGHTS! THE ALL-KNOWING GOD! By thy favour I am what I am for capacities and powers, and I acknowledge thee the first object of all. Thou hast given me an understanding beyond that of the beast of the field, that I might contemplate and know thyself; that I might reflect and become acquainted with myself, and discern my own duty, interest, and danger, in order to the attaining the perfection and felicity of my nature. For these great and glorious ends I own my faculties, under the influences of thy grace, are sufficient: and happy, abundantly so, might I have been in the attainment of those ends, had I been faithful to my light and guide, had I hearkened to the dictates of my reason and conscience, enlightened and aided by thy sacred word. But thro' the neglect of my helps, and the perversion of my faculties, how have I been led into the most pernicious mistakes! how have I been led astray by them! My love to sin hath been so strong as in too many instances

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to blind my mind, to corrupt my judgement, and to delude me by false representations of things: thro' the deceitfulness of sin I have imposed on myself, have given the lye to thy declarations, and have flattered myself in mine own eyes as innocent and righteous, whilst I stood condemned by thy law, and was hateful in thy sight.

Forgive, Gracious God! for the sake of thy dear son, my worthy redeemer, all my wilful prevarication with thee and my own conscience! the allowances I have granted myself in opposition to thy restraints! my running into temptation in contradiction to my prayers and engagements to thee! whereby my guilt hath been greatly aggravated, my offences numerous and inexcusable, and thy departure from me would have been most just. And as a testimony thou hast forgiven me, bestow upon me a more abundant measure of thy spirit's influence, to rectify my mistaken apprehensions, to reduce my wandring steps, to govern my innocent inclinations, and to mortify my criminal passions! that I may no longer be seduced from the paths of duty, peace, and safety by my love to sin, nor be led away by the error
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of the wicked, or by the corruption that is in the world through the power of my own criminal desires. May the great and important truths of the Gospel appear to me more strongly than ever in their evidence, both as to their reality and necessity! and may my faith in them answer thereto by my dread of sin, by the chearful seriousness of my temper, the circumspection of my walk, and in my growing preparation for that blissful eternity, for which both truth and duty are designed to train me up! Bless me with an humble teachable disposition! May my heart be upright! my conscience tender! my mind under the habitual influence of Christian principles; my will, affections, and whole behaviour, under the government of christian precepts! Hereby may I keep my self in the way of thy grace, which under all attainments I still need; and may I be fortified against all the scorn and seducement of the wicked to draw me from my steadfastness and fidelity to thyself! Put thy fear into my heart: preserve it there! and may it triumph over all my fear of man! By my own happy experience of the power and pleasure of religion, may I be enabled justly to de-
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spise all the pleasures of sin and sense, and to resist every attempt that shall be made upon mine integrity!

Thus by a daily improvement in goodness, and a supream regard to thine approbation, may I safely pass through every scene of vanity, folly, and vice, till I shall be called up to that blessed society, the spirits of the just made perfect, and make one with them, who from their perfection are incapable of sinning or of tempting: at the head of which, Jesus, the Saviour and Redeemer, is, who is worthy to receive, to whom therefore I would gratefully ascribe, blessing, and honour, and glory, and praise for ever. Amen.

F I N I S.